

Groups lobbying for stalled trade deals

By Victoria McGrane
Politico
May 21, 2008

The drilling supply company that Susie Givens owns in western Kentucky may be only nine people strong, but it's not too small to tell Congress to finish three trade agreements.

Givens traveled to Washington on Tuesday to deliver that message in person as part of a daylong lobbying offensive by business groups fighting for stalled trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea.

The business community is doing all it can to keep congressional attention on trade, especially on the Colombia trade pact, which House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) effectively stalled last month via the House Rules Committee.

The rules change passed by Democrats, trade experts say, means the Colombia pact loses its special "trade promotion authority" protection at the end of this year. If it's resubmitted next year, the trade pact would be open to amendment — and that, in the eyes of trade lobbyists, means it would be effectively dead.

Moreover, anti-trade rhetoric has dominated the Democratic presidential campaign, with Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York both declaring opposition to the Colombia pact and pledging to reopen the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Trade supporters hope the fly-in of members puts a personal — and, in many cases, local — face on the issue for lawmakers. In all, representatives from more than 300 businesses spread through the House and Senate office buildings Tuesday.

Like Givens, some were small-business members of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Others, such as NaviStar International Corp., a truck and diesel engine manufacturer whose main export market is Colombia, came as members of the Latin America Trade Coalition. Still others represented the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement Business Coalition.

They came armed with literature and pitches about why their particular company or industry needs the pending trade agreements. They planned to stop by every personal congressional and committee office.

With its coal mines, Colombia is a decent market for the drill bits, tubes, rods and other equipment that Kentucky-based Givens International Drilling Supplies sells internationally as well as domestically.

“It’s amazing with technology with telecommunications and everything — there’s no reason a small business can’t be doing business anywhere in the world,” Givens said as she prepared to hit up the offices of Kentucky Republican Sens. Mitch McConnell and Jim Bunning.

“It’s a simple message we’re delivering: Exports are keeping our economy afloat. Trade agreements boost exports. Exports boost our economy. Trade is the stimulus we need,” said Doug Goudie, director of international trade policy for the National Association of Manufacturers. He guided a group of business officials around Capitol Hill, including Raymond Fitzgerald, director of federal legislative relations for NaviStar.

NaviStar’s parts division estimates the Colombia trade pact would boost its exports by 35 percent — all of which would come from the United States. Its truck division — with plants based in Ohio and Texas as well as Canada and Mexico — estimates a 20 percent to 25 percent increase.

“The U.S. truck market is very cyclical,” Fitzgerald said. “We need to be able to export, especially during down times.”

Christopher Wenk, senior director of international policy for the Chamber of Commerce, led a group of representatives from Philip Morris International, Time Warner, the Colombian government and EDS, a technology services company, from office door to office door in the Russell building.

“We’re up here as the business community ... to keep the pressure on,” Wenk said. “These free trade agreements need to be acted on.”

The window for that action is shrinking by the day. Trade supporters take comfort in the fact that Pelosi hasn’t said straight-out that she’ll refuse to vote on the Colombia agreement this year. But the reality of the election-year calendar means Congress must either take the vote before the end of July or during the post-election lame-duck season.

There’s little chance the South Korea free trade agreement will make it on that timetable. But unlike the Colombia pact, the Korea deal would still be protected by the special trade promotion rules if it gets pushed to next year.

Nonetheless, many of the business leaders included the benefits of the Korea pact in their pitches. Financial services, entertainment and technology companies are among the firms that support the trade pact as the strongest the United States has negotiated.

Wearing a yellow-and-blue “¡Sí! Colombia deserves a vote” button and a navy-and-red “Pass the U.S.-Korea FTA” button, Randolph V. Dove said all trade agreements are important for his company, EDS.

“We’re a very global company. Anything that can be done to lower barriers, we’re supportive of,” he said, before meeting with an aide to Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.).

As for the meetings, “some [lawmakers] have obviously made up their minds. Others are still in a listening mode,” he said.