

Gutierrez continues pushing U.S.-Colombia free trade deal

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WASHINGTON, -- U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez said on Tuesday that he will bring a Congressional delegation to Colombia to continue the push to advance the U.S.-Colombia trade deal by showing members of Congress the remarkable transformation taking place in the South American country.

The visit of the fourth administration-led Congressional delegation will take place on Nov. 17-19 and highlight key trade pact for U.S. exports and security, according to a press release issued by the Commerce Department.

"Congress has already given Colombian exporters free access to the U.S. market," said Gutierrez. "With this trade agreement, Congress can give U.S. farmers, workers and businesses similar access to the Colombian market."

In 2006, more than 90 percent of Colombia's imports into the United States entered duty-free under unilateral U.S. trade preference programs.

This free trade agreement will level the playing field by providing duty-free treatment for U.S. exports to the fast-growing Colombian market. After Canada and Mexico, Colombia is the third largest export market for U.S. farm products in the hemisphere, according to the press release.

The United States is Colombia's leading trade partner, accounting for 39.6 percent of Colombia's exports and supplying 26.4 percent of the country's imports in 2006, the press release said.

Last week, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a free trade agreement with Peru, the first of four FTAs that U.S. President George W. Bush wants the Democrats-controlled Congress to approve before he leaves office in early 2009.

While encouraging the Senate to pass the U.S.-Peru deal as quickly as possible, the president also urged the Congress to approve pending three FTAs with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea.

"By strengthening our trading relationships with important neighbors -- including through our trade agreements with Colombia and Panama -- we will significantly advance both our economic and national security interests," he said in a statement.

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