

Pelosi Says Colombia Trade Accord Can't Pass Without Worker Aid

By Laura Litvan and Mark Drajem
Bloomberg
March 13, 2008

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said a free-trade agreement with Colombia won't pass Congress unless new assistance is offered to U.S. workers who are harmed by overseas competition.

"Until that happens, I don't see a climate here for passing a free-trade agreement," Pelosi told reporters in the Capitol.

The Bush administration said yesterday that it plans to send the Colombia trade accord to the Democratic-led Congress to force a vote. U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab told reporters yesterday that President George W. Bush will send the legislation to Congress "very shortly." Congress will have 90 legislative days to hold an up-or-down vote on the accord. The legislation can't be amended or filibustered.

The Democratic presidential candidates have made the effect of trade accords, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, a top issue in the campaign.

Bush has pressed Congress to act. In a speech yesterday to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Washington, the president said the U.S. will hurt its own interests if it "turns its back" on Colombia.

By sending the deal up without Pelosi's approval, the administration risks seeing the deal voted down on procedural grounds, or could see lawmakers undermine the rules of fast-track approval to try to avoid a vote.

Pelosi's request for worker aid echoes the demand of Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, a Montana Democrat. Baucus proposed expanding trade adjustment assistance to service workers, such as bank tellers and computer programmers, a move that could double the size of the program and is opposed by the Bush administration. Bush threatened to veto a TAA bill the House passed last year.

To contact the reporters on this story: Laura Litvan in Washington at llitvan@bloomberg.net; Mark Drajem in Washington at mdrajem@bloomberg.net