

Houston Chronicle
President Bush endorses pending free-trade measure
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President Bush notified Congress on Friday that he plans to sign off on the Central American Free Trade Agreement. This moves the measure, called CAFTA, a step closer to a battle on Capitol Hill. Trade negotiations with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua were recently completed after several rounds of talks, including one in Houston.

Bush can sign the agreement no earlier than May 21, giving U.S. trade officials time to issue reports about the effects of the agreement on the United States and the five partner countries. Although trade officials are still in negotiations to include the Dominican Republic in the Central American agreement, a report about that nation will be issued, as well.

Congress could approve the trade deal 30 days after the president signs off. However, many groups oppose the deal, and its approval could be delayed to keep it from getting caught up in election-year politics.

On Friday, about 60 local union workers protested in front of a Houston area Wal-Mart store to demonstrate their opposition to the retailer's purchases of goods manufactured abroad. Trade pacts, like the proposed Central American agreement, will continue to drive manufacturing out of the United States, they said.

"CAFTA is just going to continue to bleed jobs," said Richard Shaw, secretary/treasurer of the Harris County AFL-CIO. The United States has already lost 2.6 million manufacturing jobs in the last four years, he said. He attributed some of those losses to the North American Free Trade Agreement, which went into effect in 1994 and partnered the United States with Canada and Mexico.

Also opposing the agreement are sugar growers, including the Rio Grande Valley Sugar Growers. They fear increased imports allowed by the agreement will lower sugar prices.

Rep. Kevin Brady, R-The Woodlands, who is trying to gather congressional support for the agreement, has said it will benefit Houston-based companies, including the many engaged in international trade. More than \$611 million in Central American cargo moves across the Port of Houston docks, and \$49 million in airborne cargo moves through Houston's airports, Brady said.

"This agreement will help level the playing field for U.S. businesses competing to sell in Central America," Brady wrote in a release.