

Kirk Works To Assuage House Concerns

by Peter Cohn
Congress Daily
September 24, 2009

Trade Representative Kirk told lawmakers Wednesday he was working to avert trade tensions with China and reiterated a willingness to move forward on stalled free-trade agreements. "We're working on creating new markets for American jobs wherever we can find them. If we can do that in Panama and Colombia and [South] Korea, that's great," Kirk told CongressDaily.

He met for an hour with members of the U.S.-China Working Group, mainly to address concerns about the administration's Sept. 11 decision to impose tariffs on Chinese tire imports. That led to initial threats of retaliation by the Chinese government, including against U.S. poultry exports, a decision possibly made because of an FY09 appropriations rider sponsored by Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., blocking Chinese poultry imports.

The House's version for the upcoming fiscal year would continue the ban, while the Senate bill would allow inspections of Chinese plants to determine whether the products are safe. The Senate approach is favored by 37 House members led by Reps. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., and Mark Kirk, R-Ill., who wrote to House Appropriations leaders on Sept. 18 urging them to accede to the Senate in conference.

After Wednesday's meeting, Rep. Kirk (no relation) said Trade Representative Kirk appeared ready to put pressure on the House. "He indicated they might be willing to weaken or back off the DeLauro amendment on chickens, which in my view triggered much of this whole battle," he said. "I congratulated him and said you'd get a lot of bipartisan support for that."

Trade Representative Kirk said no final decision has been made but that his office is working with DeLauro and Agriculture Secretary Vilsack. "I think all Americans have legitimate concern about the safety of our food products, but we want to see if we can't address that in a responsible way that's WTO-compliant, so we're continuing to put the time and effort in to see if we can't thread that needle," he said.

Members were generally satisfied with Kirk's explanation of how the administration's tire decision came to pass, even if they disagreed with it. "I needed to hear the context of the decision, was it deliberative, have they thought through the implications, and that they discussed other choices they could have made ... and I heard that," Larsen said. "I also feel he's comfortable that the decision won't lead to a full tit-for-tat trade war."

Trade Representative Kirk said he finds it "laughable" that some have referred to the tires decision as protectionist. "There's not been one article written about Brazil being protectionist by going to the WTO and challenging the U.S. on cotton subsidies. The reality is dispute resolution is a very

healthy part of a rules-based trading system," Kirk said. "If it's good for Brazil and India and the EU and China, it's good for the United States."

Members did not get the answers they were looking for about next steps on trade, however. "I asked him specifically, 'Is there any serious free-trade initiative of the Obama administration?' And he basically reviewed all the free-trade agreements of the Bush administration that are not moving," said Rep. Kirk.

"He's anxious to go on offense, but they're still developing the agenda," added House Ways and Means Trade Subcommittee ranking member Kevin Brady, R-Texas.

"They want to move on Panama and Colombia, but the members of Congress just don't feel it's a high priority, particularly in a recessionary period," said Rep. Jim Moran, D-Va. "I can understand where they're coming from, and I'm a free trader. If I were representing Michigan, I might very well have a different point of view. I'd be surprised if Panama or Colombia gets through, and then next year is an election year."

Rep. Bill Pascrell, D-N.J., a trade skeptic, was also dissatisfied -- but for different reasons. "I asked him, 'Do you think there's any difference between the Obama administration's trade policies and Bush-Clinton? He got the idea where I was coming from,'" Pascrell said. "I want to have trade with China, but our industries have suffered too much and I think we've got the same mindset as we've had for the last 20 years. And I think it's dangerous for American industry."