

US Commerce Secy: May Add New Labor Measures To Colombia Trade Deal

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August 10, 2009

WASHINGTON --The Obama administration is considering including additional measures to strengthen the labor protections in the Colombia free trade agreement before submitting it to Congress, U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke said Monday.

Locke said there is no timeline on when the Colombia deal - which has been held over from the last administration along with pacts with South Korea and Panama - will be sent to Congress for passage. But he said President Barack Obama remains committed to addressing lawmakers' concerns about violence against labor unions in Colombia in order to get the FTA approved.

After meeting with Colombia President Alvaro Uribe in June, Obama "reaffirmed his support for trying to move that trade agreement forward, but there are some concerns on the Hill dealing with the issue of violence against labor leaders," Locke said at a forum with U.S. business representatives.

"So we need to develop a strategy and an action plan, and perhaps additional agreements that might be incorporated that would be brought to members of Congress when that trade agreement is ready for action," he said.

Locke said he wasn't sure if the measures would be made part of the agreement or just added on as addendums, noting that U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk is heading up the effort to conclude the trade deals.

In addition to conferring with lawmakers, the USTR office has also sought public comment on both the Colombia and South Korean pacts. The comment period for the deals, which began in late July, will last until Sept. 15.

The administration is seeking input on whether the Colombian government is taking adequate steps to ensure overall labor rights and protect workers from violence and intimidation, including prosecuting such acts.