

# Levin Argues Against Fast-Track Trade Authority

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The chairman of the House Ways and Means Trade Subcommittee asserted Tuesday that Congress does not need to renew fast-track negotiating authority as the Obama administration begins trade talks with Pacific Rim nations.

The assessment by Rep. Sander M. Levin, D-Mich., came a day after U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk formally notified congressional leaders that the administration intends to enter negotiations to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an Asia-Pacific free-trade group, promising close consultations with Congress throughout the process.

Speaking to the Washington International Trade Association, Levin said he was pleased that the administration has begun the talks. He noted that much of the Uruguay Round trade talks in the 1980s and 1990s — which led to the formation of the World Trade Organization — were negotiated without fast-track authority in place.

“We negotiated a major agreement, the Uruguay Round, without fast track,” the Michigan Democrat said. “The key to moving ahead is active consultation between the administration and Congress at every important step.”

Unlike his predecessor, President Obama does not currently have fast track — formally known as trade promotion authority — which would give him a freer hand in negotiating with other countries. Under fast track, which expired in 2007, Congress is required to quickly take an up-or-down vote on trade deals submitted by the White House, which may not be amended by lawmakers.

Many presidents have seen fast track as a vital negotiating tool, since it assures foreign governments that even though Congress can reject trade deals signed by the president, it can't tinker with the terms. But the current skepticism about free trade among many lawmakers could make it tough to renew the authority.

Levin's GOP counterpart on the trade subcommittee, Kevin Brady, R-Texas, said that while the political climate is not conducive to a renewal of fast track, it will be needed “at the end of the day.”

The Trans-Pacific Partnership currently includes Singapore, New Zealand, Brunei and Chile; the United States, Vietnam and Peru are all potential additions.