

Bush lobbies Congress to pass free-trade deals

By Deb Riechmann
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WASHINGTON — A concrete mixer. Crates of cauliflower. A Harley-Davidson. Chunks of cheese?

President Bush used a White House lawn stacked with props Friday to press Congress to approve free-trade pacts with Colombia, Panama and South Korea.

A heavy, white concrete truck, earth-moving equipment and a fire and rescue vehicle were rolled onto the South Lawn to give Bush a new backdrop for his umpteenth speech lauding the upsides of free trade.

So far, Congress hasn't budged. Among lawmakers' concerns is the impact that free-trade deals will have on U.S. workers, especially during lean economic times.

Bush rebuffed that, saying that 40 percent of U.S. economic growth last year came as a result of exports.

"For some in Washington, trade is a political issue," he said. "In other words, people think it makes good politics to say `We're not going to let you trade.'

"Those voices of pessimism and voices of protectionism must understand that oftentimes, opening up markets means the difference between giving employees a pay raise or a pay cut."

He cited American-made bicycles and bales of cotton, staged on the grass, as examples of a lopsided tariff structure the U.S. has with the three countries he's seeking to get into new trade agreements. The Marine Band played. The audience waved American flag fans. Wooden crates of oranges, lettuce, broccoli and lemons warmed in the sunshine.

Acting the part of auctioneer, Bush barked: "That motorcycle right there — 20 percent more expensive in Colombia, 8 percent more in Korea and 15 percent more in Panama."

"This Case tractor ... will be \$15,000 cheaper in Colombia," he told the crowd of administration officials, lawmakers, trade advocates and foreign dignitaries. ... There's a 20 percent tariff on dairy products from the United States into Colombia, 36 percent into Korea."

Bush said the House's decision to block a vote on a Colombia free trade agreement was a serious error and urged Congress to reconsider. Democrats have cited the continued

violence against organized labor in Colombia and differences with the administration over how to extend a program that helps U.S. workers displaced by foreign competition.

The president said the U.S. must show its support for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, who is working to transform his country from a near-failed state to a stable democracy with a growing economy, and has been a partner with the United States in fighting drugs and terrorism.

In case anyone missed the South Lawn event, White House press secretary Dana Perino showed up at a briefing holding a golf ball — one more product, she said, that would be affected by opening overseas markets.

Perino said 35 percent of the sales of American-made golf balls go to international markets. In Korea, U.S.-made golf balls face an 8 percent duty, she said. In Colombia, "there's a staggering double-hit of a 20 percent tariff and a 16 percent tax on any U.S.-made golf ball."

"Putt-Putt golf?" she asked rhetorically. "Putt-Putt golf is a growth industry possibly."