

Associated Press
Costa Rica Leader Sends CAFTA to Congress
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Costa Rica's president sent the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement to Congress on Friday, giving lawmakers an opportunity to join the free trade deal before it becomes law, likely next year.

Costa Rica is the last country left that needs to approve CAFTA. Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic have already joined.

President Abel Pacheco had initially argued that Congress needed to pass a series of fiscal reforms before considering CAFTA.

But in a news conference Friday, he said he believed the free trade pact would strengthen almost all of the country's economic sectors.

Still, he said he believed lawmakers should first approve a bill strengthening the state-run Electrical Institute before tackling CAFTA.

The institute runs the country's energy and telecommunications industries, both of which must be opened to competition if CAFTA is adopted by Costa Rica.

Lawmakers welcomed the free trade deal. They earlier sent a letter to Pacheco asking him to send it to them for their consideration, and they appeared to have enough votes to approve the pact, though promoters said they feared filibuster attempts by critics could stall it.

Union leaders promises massive street protests during lawmakers' debate.

Wrapping up a weeklong trade mission to Central America, U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez said Friday in El Salvador that he hoped Costa Rica approved CAFTA soon, adding that U.S. President George W. Bush made the pact's "success a very high priority."