

Trade Reps From US, Mexico, Canada Meet Over Nafta

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VANCOUVER, British Columbia --Senior U.S., Canadian and Mexican trade officials met in Canada this week for two days of talks aimed at expanding the flow of goods within the North American Free Trade Agreement.

U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab left the second day of the meeting Tuesday saying, "NAFTA works."

The meeting is a prelude to next week's meeting of U.S. President George W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Calderon at Montebello, Quebec.

Schwab, Canadian International Trade Minister David Emerson and Mexico's Secretary of the Economy Eduardo Sojo discussed ways to further liberalize trade without reopening NAFTA and discussed NAFTA interests regarding the next round of World Trade Organization talks.

Between 1994, when NAFTA went into effect, and 2005, total trade among the three countries grew by 128% to reach US\$772 billion, according to Mexican officials. In 2005, bilateral trade between Mexico and the US amounted to US\$288 billion, while total trade during the same period between Mexico and Canada amounted to US\$18 billion.

The three ministers agreed to examine further ways of improving the movement of goods and reducing barriers to trade regarding swine, steel and consumer electronics and further broadening the base of goods receiving NAFTA duty-free treatment.

NAFTA has become the target of Democratic U.S. presidential hopefuls as they try to attract the labor vote.

Senator Hillary Clinton, D-NY, says the North American Free Trade Agreement "has hurt America" and former Senator John Edwards vowed to fight trade deals that do not benefit American workers. Barack Obama has said he would revise NAFTA.

Schwab sidestepped the comments.

"It is not a good idea for me to wade into electoral politics in the United States at this time other than to say, as we've made clear here today, that NAFTA really has been a success," she said.

While labor conditions and environmental standards have been sensitive issues, Schwab saw no reason to reopen NAFTA to address those.

"For its time, NAFTA was really a forward-leaning and well ahead of its time in terms of including labor and environmental provisions," Schwab said.