

## **US, CAFTA Countries Sign Environmental Deals**

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Source: Reuters

**WASHINGTON - The United States signed environmental agreements Friday with five Central American countries and the Dominican Republic that the White House hopes will improve the chances of a free trade pact getting through Congress.**

Many Democrats have criticized the US-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) as not having strong enough protections for workers and the environment.

Those concerns, plus stiff opposition from labor groups, sugar farmers and many textile companies set the stage for a bruising fight once President Bush submits the agreement to Congress for a vote.

Bush administration officials said Friday's agreements bolster environmental provisions in CAFTA that already go beyond previous trade pacts.

"These two supplemental agreements are evidence that strengthening our trade relationship can also strengthen our environmental relationship," outgoing US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick said in a statement.

Jake Caldwell, an attorney with the National Wildlife Federation, said he was skeptical the supplement agreements would make much of a difference.

"I am hopeful, but not convinced these agreements will lead to real-world, measurable environmental improvement in Central America," he said.

One pact establishes a secretariat to allow interested parties to file complaints if they believe a country is not living up to a CAFTA commitment to effectively enforce its environmental laws.

The second calls on the countries to set goals for improving environmental protections and establish benchmarks to measure how well those are being achieved.

US exports to Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic total about \$15 billion annually, which the Bush administration says makes that market the 13th largest for US exports.

The agreement is expected to boost US farm shipments to the region about \$1.5 billion annually. American manufacturers and other business groups also hope to see large gains.