

Feingold's right, Kohl is wrong

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When the U.S. Senate voted on a proposed free trade agreement between the United States and Peru, Wisconsin's Democratic senators took different positions.

That's important not so much because of this particular agreement -- a relatively small one -- but because it comes at a time when a number of more significant trade deals are being prepared by the White House for consideration by Congress. Emboldened by the 77-18 Senate vote for the Peru agreement, the Bush administration is now expected to push for congressional approval of trade pacts with Colombia, Panama and South Korea.

The sweeping expansion of trade relations may look good on the surface. But it comes without adequate protections for workers, farmers and consumers in the United States and in the countries with which we trade. New trade deals with Latin American countries will -- not may, but will -- force small farmers off the land in those countries and increase the flow of undocumented workers into the United States.

Fortunately, Sen. Russ Feingold recognizes the flaws in the trade policies advanced by the Bush administration. He voted no on the Peru deal, saying that the plan expands trade policies that "have left communities across my state devastated, and I know the same is true in communities around this country."

Unfortunately, Sen. Herb Kohl sided with the Bush administration and voted yes.

Kohl claims that the Peru agreement contains more protections for workers and the environment than failed deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement. "For the first time, the U.S. will have the right to hold a trading partner accountable if labor or environmental issues become a problem," says the senator.

Kohl's fooling himself if he believes that.

As Feingold notes, protections for workers and the environment -- which take the form of a mechanism for imposing sanctions for treaty violations -- are actually weaker in the Peru agreement than in some previous trade treaties.

"The decision to impose sanctions must be taken by two decision-makers -- the president and a panel of international arbitrators," explained Feingold, who argues correctly that international arbitrators are extremely unlikely to enforce the "vague labor principles" contained in this agreement and that President Bush cannot be counted on to do so.

Feingold has read the fine print and studied the realities of international trade policy.

Kohl has fallen for the worst sort of Bush team spin, and workers, farmers and consumers in the United States and Peru will suffer as a result. So too will the environment. And our immigration challenges will grow more profound.

We hope that by the time more sweeping agreements come before Congress, Kohl will have taken a more serious approach on trade.

He could begin by listening to an expert: Russ Feingold.