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Peru wants trade pact by 2005

Ambassador says it's healthy, just like asparagus

By JENALIA MORENO
Houston Chronicle

When your mother told you to finish eating your asparagus, chances are the green vegetable on your plate was from Peru.

About a third of all fresh, frozen and canned asparagus sold in the United States is from the South American nation.

Hoping to increase Peru's exports of agricultural and other products through a proposed free trade agreement with the United States, Peruvian Ambassador to the United States Eduardo Ferrero visited Houston on Friday to talk to members of the Greater Houston Partnership.

Peru and its Andean neighbors Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador are negotiating a free trade agreement with the United States. Negotiators hope to complete their talks by January so Congress can approve the agreement before the president's fast track authority expires next summer. That authority lets Congress vote yes or no, without rewriting a pact negotiated by the president.

Leaders of these South American nations are also eager to sign a trade agreement before 2006 when the Andean Trade Preferences Act expires. That act gives several Andean products, like asparagus, tariff-free access to the United State.

Last year, Peru sent \$80 million worth of asparagus to the United States, Ferrero said.

"This allows Americans to enjoy asparagus year-round," said Ferrero.

Several issues remain, including agricultural subsidies paid by the United States and Andean rules setting some minimum prices.

"We don't want subsidies, and the U.S. doesn't want price bands," Ferrero said.

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