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Textile Industry to Request Limits on Chinese Goods

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 1 - Officials of the United States textile industry said on Wednesday that they would petition the Bush administration this month to block the flood of Chinese imports that is expected next year after global quotas on textiles and apparel are lifted.

The White House rejected a similar request made earlier this year by 130 Republican and Democratic members of Congress. In contrast, an administration official said on Wednesday that it would consider the appeal by the industry, much of which is centered in politically pivotal swing states.

The expiration of the quotas on Jan. 1, 2005, was designed to allow for free-flowing trade in textiles and clothing. But thousands of firms in developing countries like Bangladesh and Cambodia, as well as companies in the United States, fear that China, with its huge advantages, will take over the global market and drive them out of business. Leaders of the textile and apparel industry warn that the United States could lose 600,000 jobs if action is not taken this year.

The appeal by the lawmakers earlier this year asked that the administration seek to postpone the lifting of the quotas. Now the industry is asking for restrictions on how much China can increase its exports here of apparel like shirts, blouses, slacks, dresses and some underwear, as well as home furnishings like cotton towels and sheets. The request is unusual because petitions to limit imports normally come after they have damaged a domestic industry.

"We can't afford to wait for the market disruption to occur," said Karl Spilhaus, president of the National Textile Association, a trade group. "That's tantamount to calling the fire department after the house has burned down."

Mary Brown Brewer, a spokeswoman for the Commerce Department, said the administration would consider the petition for a safeguard even though it was based on a threat to the United States market rather than an actual disruption.

"We review every petition received very carefully and make our decisions on a case-by-case basis," Ms. Brewer said in a statement, adding that the petition had to include "sufficient specific data necessary to make a determination as to whether imports are disrupting or threatening to disrupt the U.S. market."

If the administration imposed a safeguard just before the lifting of the quotas, it could cause confusion in the global textile industry as companies and countries prepare to abide by the agreement reached 10 years ago to drop all quotas. Industry officials also acknowledge that restricting imports could hurt American consumers.

"There may be less expensive goods at Wal-Mart, but at what cost in terms of lost jobs, lost wages, lost taxes paid to communities?" said Cass Johnson, the president of the National Council of Textile Organizations.

But designers and merchandisers who would benefit from the lifting of quotas said manufacturers were trying to take advantage of a tough political battle in the presidential campaign. The textile industry has been governed by quotas for 40 years and has had a decade to prepare for the gradual elimination of them, said Brenda A. Jacobs, a trade lawyer in Washington for the United States Association of Importers of Textiles and Apparel.

"This is a scare tactic, an obvious political ploy," Ms. Jacobs said. "There is no question that the quotas will be lifted. There is no opportunity for a reversal."

With its vice presidential nominee, Senator John Edwards, hailing from North Carolina, a major textile state, the Democratic campaign of John Kerry said it sided with the textile industry. Phil Singer, a campaign spokesman, said that the proposed safeguards were necessary because the Bush administration had failed to stand up to China's unfair trading practices. Chief among the industry's complaints is that China manipulates its currency, which has helped it lower apparel prices by as much as 50 percent to seize more of the market.

"Senator Kerry wouldn't wait until after we lost our jobs before enforcing our labor laws," Mr. Singer said. "The current administration's approach has been to stand by as tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs were zapped over the last four years."

The American textile trade groups have joined dozens of other industry groups from 50 countries in asking the World Trade Organization to vote on slowing down the elimination of quotas before the January deadline.

But global trade officials have said privately that they are losing their patience with these industry groups. They are concentrating their efforts on how to help developing nations that could suffer lasting damage with the loss of their special access to rich nations, especially the United States.