

Foley says Congress not likely to pass CAFTA

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VAIL, Colo. — A proposed free trade agreement that has Florida's sugar industry worried probably won't be approved by Congress.

The votes just aren't there.

That was the prediction Tuesday about the Central American Free Trade Agreement from one of Florida's own congressmen at the International Sweetener Symposium being held in the mountains of Vail, Colo.

"People are still hemorrhaging over NAFTA," said U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, R-West Palm Beach, referring to the 10-year-old North America Free Trade Agreement among the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Meanwhile, industry representatives at the conference sponsored by the American Sugar Alliance were encouraged by word that sugar is "very likely" to be designated as a sensitive product in the upcoming round of World Trade Organization talks.

Jim Grueff, a top trade policy official with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, told attendees that the designation will allow the U.S. to keep higher tariffs on products that are most sensitive to import competition.

Foley, deputy majority whip in the House and a member of its Ways and Means Committee, was one of the keynote speakers Tuesday at the conference sponsored by the American Sugar Alliance. Foley recognized members of the Florida sugar industry, who are attending the meeting with more than 300 sugar producers and refiners from other states and countries.

"CAFTA may sound like a good idea in theory, but if we don't get it right, a lot of people will be hurt," Foley said.

Many Florida tomato growers left the business after NAFTA's passage and the entry of duty-free tomatoes from Mexico and Canada, Foley said, adding that the same thing could happen to citrus and sugar growers if they are not protected from unfair foreign competition.

If ratified by Congress, CAFTA would initially allow an additional 109,000 tons of sugar into the United States.

"We need to defend the Florida sugar and citrus industries against an onslaught of foreign competition that is heavily subsidized, that pays extremely low wages and requires no health insurance costs, no liability costs, no pension costs and no costs to protect air and water quality," Foley said.

Foley told the group he initially voted against fast-track legislation that allowed for trade agreements to be given either a yes or no vote from Congress without any changes to the pacts. But after some changes were made to the fast-track legislation, he voted for it, Foley said after his speech.

In a later session, panelists representing labor unions, manufacturers and farmers discussed the chances of CAFTA's passage and predicted it could bring more of the kinds of job losses the U.S. saw after NAFTA.

Augustine Tantillo, Washington coordinator for the American Manufacturing Trade Action Coalition, said the U.S. trade deficit for goods in 2003 was \$549 billion. That equates to a loss of \$1.5 billion a day in U.S. wealth, or \$1 million per minute.

More than 3 million manufacturing jobs have been lost in the U.S. in the past five years, Tantillo said. Retail jobs, now at 23.1 million, pay only half as much as manufacturing jobs, now at 14.6 million.

"It is ludicrous to believe that CAFTA is going to improve the trade deficit or create jobs in the U.S.," Tantillo said.