

# **Bush officials tout trade agenda, woo Congress**

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WASHINGTON -- Top U.S. officials head to Congress on Monday to rally support for President George W. Bush's trade agenda, seeking to smooth the path for free trade deals among lawmakers deeply divided on the issue.

Sen. Charles Grassley, the Senate Finance Committee's ranking Republican, will host U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab, Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns, and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, along with business groups that are lobbying for swift passage of agreements with Peru, Panama, Colombia and South Korea.

"We're rested and ready and we're going to come out in full force," said Nicole Venable, director of international and global competitiveness at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Business and agriculture groups have been trying to build support in both parties for the agreements, but Venable acknowledged it would not be an easy task.

Some senior lawmakers are already on record against the agreement with South Korea, which they believe gives the U.S. auto industry a bad deal, and promise to oppose the deal with Colombia until the government there can prove it is doing more to protect workers against violence.

Since last fall's congressional elections brought in a host of trade-wary lawmakers, the Bush administration has been trying to reach out to allies in Congress -- so far without votes to show for its efforts. No other lawmakers are scheduled to join Grassley, an Iowa Republican, in Monday's rally, an aide said.

For now, supporters are focusing on the agreement with Peru, seen as the least contentious of the lot.

The Senate Finance Committee will hold a hearing on that agreement on Tuesday, and the House of Representatives is expected to do the same sometime soon.

Nick Giordano, who follows trade for the National Pork Producers Council, said a strong vote for the Peru deal could increase momentum for the other deals. Venable agreed: "Peru is going to be a barometer," she said.

Chris Garza, a trade analyst at the American Farm Bureau Federation, expects the Panama agreement will be next in line. "Everyone's going to be picking up their game" to push passage of the deals, he said.

Another pillar of the administration's agenda is trade promotion authority, which allows Bush's negotiators to broker trade deals that are voted on in Congress without changes.

Bush's authority lapsed in June, and the administration has not yet to ask Congress to renew it.