

White House gearing up drive for Latam trade pacts

By Doug Palmer
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WASHINGTON -- U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez will lead members of Congress on a trip next week to Colombia, Peru and Panama, as the White House steps up a lobbying campaign to win congressional approval of free trade pacts with all three countries.

"Right now, Congress already allows more than 90 percent of Panama, Peru and Colombia's imports to enter the U.S. duty free," Gutierrez said in a statement on Friday announcing the September 12-15 trip. "These agreements will level the playing field by providing duty-free treatment for the majority of U.S. exports to these countries."

The fate of the three trade agreements has been uncertain since Democrats won control of Congress in last November's election. Earlier this year, U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab reached a deal with top Democrats to strengthen the labor and environmental provisions of the pacts.

Gutierrez will lead a bipartisan group that includes Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and about a dozen members of Congress to meet with the presidents of three countries and local business and worker representatives.

The U.S. delegation includes Rep. Joseph Crowley, a New York Democrat who opposed a controversial free trade agreement with Central America in 2005, but other lawmakers making the trip have been reliable supporters of trade pacts.

Gutierrez, Schwab and U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns were scheduled to hold a rally with business groups on Monday to push for the three Latin American agreements and a fourth deal with South Korea that many auto state lawmakers strongly oppose.

Bill Reinsch, president of the National Foreign Trade Council, told reporters on Friday he was optimistic Congress would approve both the Peru and the Panama agreements before the end of year.

While only 15 Democrats voted for the Central American agreement, as many as 100 to 150 could vote for the Peru and Panama pacts, Reinsch said. However, more time is needed to build support for the Colombia and South Korea deal, he said.

The Senate Finance Committee will kick off action on the Peru agreement with a hearing next week. That is expected to be followed in coming weeks by a hearing in the House of Representative's Ways and Means Committee.

Peruvian labor officials were in Washington on Friday to discuss with Ways and Means Committee members various steps Peru is taking to strengthen its labor regime.

Peruvian Ambassador Feline Ortiz de Zevallo said he saw no major snags holding up the agreement and was optimistic Congress would approve the pact soon.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is planning a member fly-in in early October to push for the Peru pact.