

CEOs push for passage of Colombia trade deal

By Kevin Bogardus
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A group of top corporate executives called upon Congress Tuesday to pass a contentious free trade agreement (FTA) with Colombia that has stalled because of intense union opposition.

In a letter to both House and Senate leadership, 19 chief executive officers, including leaders of Microsoft and Wal-Mart, urged lawmakers to pass the trade agreement as soon as possible during this Congress.

“Each passing day means lost economic opportunities for American farmers, manufacturers, service providers and their workers and a loss of Latin America’s confidence in America’s interest in our own hemisphere,” said Harold McGraw III, chairman, president and CEO of the McGraw-Hill companies, speaking Tuesday on Capitol Hill.

McGraw is also chairman of the Emergency Committee for American Trade (ECAT), a pro-trade group that helped organize the letter. ECAT also published the letter in an ad in Tuesday’s edition of The Hill.

ECAT and other free trade advocates have come up against strident opposition from U.S. labor organizers on the Colombian trade pact. The AFL-CIO, America’s largest union organization, has opposed the deal because of the South American nation’s poor record on curbing violence against union organizers.

Most Democrats have sided with the AFL-CIO on the issue, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), whose panel oversees such trade pacts.

Democratic opposition has stalled the agreement in the House, and the bill has yet to come to the floor this year. Until Colombia demonstrates it is prosecuting the people who have murdered labor organizers, the deal will not move forward, according to Democrats.

A trade pact with Peru, however, has not run into the same roadblocks as the Colombian deal. Last week, the Senate signed off on the free trade agreement in a lopsided vote in its favor. ECAT wants the same action taken on the Colombian agreement.

The Bush administration has pushed hard for Congress to approve all free trade agreements, but has made a special effort on the Colombian pact. Cabinet officials have led at least four congressional delegation trips to Colombia, advocating for lawmakers to approve the deal.

In addition, Colombian government officials, including President Alvaro Uribe, have visited Washington several times over the last year to make the case for the FTA.

They argue that the deal would primarily help U.S. exporters, since the vast majority of Colombia's imports entered the U.S. duty-free in 2006. The free trade agreement would provide similar protections to U.S. goods going to Colombia.

ECAT released the letter to the public Tuesday at a press conference that included among expected guests Reps. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) and Wally Herger (R-Calif.).