

Colombia free trade pact should be approved

By Dave Reichert
Guest Columnist
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After eighteen months of bipartisan negotiations, the Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was submitted to Congress this week. In this time of economic uncertainty, it is more important than ever to enact measures that grow our economy and create jobs for American workers. The Colombia FTA does this and more, and deserves broad support and swift passage in Congress.

I'm an ardent supporter of free and fair trade, first and foremost because I have witnessed the economic benefits that trade delivers to Washington state. Washington is one of the most trade-dependent states in the nation, with one out of three jobs tied to trade. We export more than \$61 billion in goods and services annually.

Knowing some of my constituents are concerned about this FTA, I wanted to examine the situation firsthand and determine what must be done to benefit as many people as possible. This past weekend, I traveled to Colombia with U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab and members from both parties to investigate.

I met with disarmed paramilitaries and displaced workers who believe the FTA will improve their quality of life by cementing access to U.S. markets. I met with union leaders in Cartagena who oppose the FTA, and union leaders in Medellin who support it. I spoke with President Alvaro Uribe about how the FTA will affect his country's security, safety and freedom, his relations with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, and efforts to stop the illegal drug trade.

My visit confirmed the critical importance of enacting this agreement for three key reasons.

First, the FTA will open new markets for American businesses and farmers while bringing fairness to our existing trade relationship. Virtually all of Colombian goods enter America duty-free, while American goods face tariffs. With so many jobs tied to trade in Washington, common sense says we must level the playing field.

Particularly interesting is the extent of Colombian labor support for the agreement. The labor leaders opposing the FTA represent workers unaffected by trade, and their responses in our meetings lacked specifics. Their arguments were clearly based in the fear that the near-certain success of the FTA will bring widespread acclaim to their political opponents in the Colombian government, even with a president who has an 84 percent approval rating, and simply because they distrust the United States.

Second, the FTA will support democracy in an unstable region. It's imperative for Americans to view free-trade agreements not just as a mutual economic benefit, but also as a core component

of our country's diplomacy and security. Colombia stands tall as a beacon of democracy in the face of Chávez's anti-American policies and is a staunch ally in efforts to combat the drug trade.

Incidentally, almost 50 percent of Colombia is rain forest, and the biggest enemies of the rain forest there are cocaine producers, who cut down trees to grow their crops for the drug trade. By stopping them, we have an indirect but positive effect on our environment.

The nation continues its remarkable transformation, with judicial reforms that support human rights while fighting drug lords, terrorists, and criminals. Since 2002, kidnappings are down 83 percent, murders of unionists are down more than 80 percent, and thousands of new policemen patrol the streets.

On my visit, I met with displaced workers driven from their homes by fear and death; who had lost loved ones to war and terrorism. They said they wanted to work to improve their lives and the future for their children. They now have access to education that no poor Colombian had before. It's clear the Colombian people and government are making progress, but they still look to the United States for leadership and help. Walking away from an ally would send a terrible message.

Third, enacting the Colombia FTA on the heels of our recent agreement with Peru will enable Congress to advance other pending trade deals, most notably with Korea, Washington state's fourth-largest trading partner. Passing the U.S.-Korea FTA is vital to our economic growth and job creation. Rejecting trade agreements sends a signal that America is closed for business and emboldens China and Europe to exploit those markets.

I challenge opponents of the Colombia FTA to conduct their own investigation, because I believe that engaging in true fact-gathering — instead of an exchange of partisan talking points — would lead them to enthusiastically support this agreement. The Colombia FTA has been negotiated time and again to accede to political gamesmanship, and it has languished long enough. Let's pass the Colombia FTA.