

# Congress may cut off spending on Mexican trucks

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WASHINGTON -- Congress may force President Barack Obama into a showdown with Mexico over free trade.

Lawmakers are preparing to cut off the money for a 1 1/2-year-old pilot program that opened the way for up to 500 Mexican trucks from 100 operators to drive deeper into the United States.

The U.S. has allowed only a few Mexican trucks to drive beyond a southern border buffer zone, although it agreed when it signed the North American Free Trade Agreement to give Mexican trucks full access to U.S. roadways beginning in 1995.

If the U.S. doesn't comply with the NAFTA agreement, Mexico can take retaliatory action such as placing or raising tariffs on U.S. goods.

"If the program is finally defunded by Congress, Mexico will (keep) open all its options, including retaliation," said Arturo Sarukhan, Mexico's ambassador to the U.S.

White House spokesman Benjamin LaBolt declined in an e-mail to comment about the truck program. But Tren Nguyen, a spokeswoman for the U.S. trade representative's office, said the office is examining all possible options. She would not say what those options are.

For now, Congress isn't one of the options.

The Senate is considering a \$410 billion House-passed spending bill that halts funding for the Mexican truck program. Two years ago, the Senate voted 74-24 to cut off the funding. Voting with the majority at the time were Obama and Joe Biden, now the vice president.

Senate Republicans don't even plan to try to keep the program alive now that a Democrat is in the White House.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who tried to keep the money flowing in 2007, is not inclined to do so again, an aide said this week.

"It's very disappointing that my colleagues have chosen protectionism over job creation by eliminating the NAFTA trucking pilot program with Mexico," Cornyn said.

Money for the program could be slipped into other spending bills, but would again face heavy opposition.

Obama discussed NAFTA with Mexican President Felipe Calderon when the two met about a week after Obama took office, and Obama said he would work immediately to strengthen the relationship between the two countries.

Since 1982, most Mexican trucks have been confined to driving no further than 20 miles into the U.S., except in Arizona, where the limit is 75 miles.

The Teamsters, consumer groups and independent insurers have been pressuring Congress to keep the trucks off U.S. roadways, citing safety concerns.

But some of the strongest opposition has come from unions concerned about U.S. drivers losing jobs and work to lower-paid Mexican drivers.

The Bush administration began the pilot program after a Mexican truck company sued under NAFTA and won. Congress cut funding for the pilot program in late 2007. The Bush administration continued it after finding a loophole in the law.

Bill Adams, a Transportation Department spokesman, declined to comment on whether the agency would do the same again.

Inside U.S. Trade, an online publication, quoted Duane DeBruyne, a spokesman for the Transportation Department's Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, as saying Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood ordered a review of the Mexican trucks program on Feb. 9. As a House member, LaHood also voted to end the program.

Sarukhan, the Mexican ambassador, said keeping Mexican trucks from U.S. roads will raise the cost of goods for producers and consumers.

"This is protectionism," he said. "It has nothing to do with the safety or security of American roads."