

Free trade could help lift us out of current economic mire

BY DAVE REICHERT (WA-08)

Guest Op-Ed

The News Tribune

June 25, 2009

As lawmakers continue to debate solutions to revive our ailing economy, a pillar of recovery that must not be forgotten is the vital role free trade plays in growing our economy and creating jobs.

With unemployment numbers continuing to rise, there is no better time than now to affirm our nation's commitment to stimulating our economy by opening and engaging new markets.

American businesses large and small produce the very best goods and services in the world; but their customers are increasingly located not in corner stores on Main Street but in ports, cities, and rural communities across the globe. We can best stimulate American jobs by connecting American products and services with new global markets that demand them.

Trade can have this job-creating effect whether these markets are opened for Microsoft software, Boeing airplanes or Caterpillar construction equipment as much as it can for a small manufacturer in Kent or the apple and potato farms across Eastern Washington.

While the ongoing recovery debate centers on tax cuts and public spending, investments and new lending, and price tags that grow by the day, Congress cannot overlook trade, which can stimulate jobs without costing taxpayers a penny.

I've spoken with President Barack Obama's new U.S. trade representative, Ron Kirk, about the role trade can play as an economic stimulus, and I'm encouraged by his public commitment "to revive global trade." Unfortunately, meaningful debate over trade often falls victim to partisan politics that distort the issues at hand, and it will require the leadership of Obama's administration and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to advance a robust trade agenda that stimulates our economy.

That agenda should begin by enacting pending agreements with Panama, Colombia and South Korea that have languished far too long. Opening these new markets gives employers incentives to improve their products, produce more goods and employ more U.S. workers.

In the cases of Panama and Colombia, these agreements simply make trade with our allies fair – where American goods and services are treated the same as Panamanian and Colombian products. In the case of South Korea, we have an opportunity to open a huge market and gain a competitive edge over the European Union, which is about to conclude an agreement of its own.

We must not forget that we are engaged in a global economy, and commerce does not stop at our nation's borders. Europe, China, and others continue to knock down trade barriers and are becoming increasingly competitive. America cannot be just a fellow participant in the global economy – we must lead it.

Now is the time for America to open doors to new markets. If we fail to act, America will be left behind in the global marketplace and our workers, economy, and leadership in the international community will suffer as a result.

As Americans confront economic uncertainty, they are looking for common-sense solutions for economic recovery. Families are looking for stability and security in their jobs and for their children. We have foreign markets demanding U.S. goods and services and capable workers ready to produce them.

Trade can put us on the path to recovery by removing barriers that prevent American employers from engaging new customers around the world. If we are to create new jobs and turn our economy around, free trade is a crucial pillar of recovery that must not crumble.

U.S. Rep. Dave Reichert, a member of the House Ways & Means Trade Subcommittee, represents Washington's 8th Congressional District.