

Lawmakers Talk Trade To Obama Team

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The fate of the Colombia free trade agreement is in limbo, but it looks like President-elect Barack Obama doesn't plan to entirely ignore the hot-button issue of trade.

On Wednesday, transition team members overseeing the office of the U.S. Trade Representative met with Rep. Mike Michaud (D-Maine), a leading trade critic, and with staffers from other House members that make up the House Trade Working Group. The group, which formed at the beginning of the 110th Congress, has led a vocal and well-organized effort against Bush trade deals, challenging House Democratic leadership on the issue.

The transition trade team met the same day with members of the moderate New Democrat Coalition, a group that is generally supportive of free trade agreements – including the controversial Colombia pact – though they've had their problems with the current administration's handling of it, too.

A Democratic source described the meeting with the New Dems as a chance for transition officials to listen to lawmakers' views.

"I appreciate President-elect Obama's team keeping in touch with Members of Congress on trade policy and globalization issues," Michaud said in a statement. "I know that the House Trade Working Group looks forward to working with the new Administration to craft a trade agenda that will benefit our economy. President-elect Obama's commitments to review existing trade agreements and to oppose passing more of the same Bush trade policies, including the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, are welcome changes in direction. We appreciate his commitment to consulting our group on a regular basis and I look forward to our continued dialogue."

The Obama transition office did not immediately respond to a request for names of the officials at the meetings. The transition Web site lists Donald Abelson, Elizabeth Cavanagh and Peter Cowhey as the team overseeing the USTR agency review.