

# Mexico sees U.S. acting quickly on truck dispute

By Doug Palmer  
Washington Post  
April 23, 2009

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Barack Obama has promised to move quickly to open U.S. roads to Mexican trucks in order to halt Mexico's retaliation on \$2.4 billion of U.S. exports, a Mexican official said on Thursday.

"Obama was very clear he wants to solve the issue as soon as possible," when he met last week with Mexican President Felipe Calderon, said Jose Luis Paz, head of the trade office at Mexico's embassy in Washington.

"We are confident we will solve this issue in the short-term," he said during a panel discussion on the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The United States committed in that 15-year-old pact to open its roads to Mexican trucks. But the International Brotherhood of Teamsters union, which represents U.S. truckers, has fought that measure every step of the way.

In a recent newspaper column, Teamsters President James Hoffa said the United States should not allow itself to be bullied into letting "older, dirtier and more dangerous" Mexican trucks onto its roads.

Mexico retaliated in March after Obama signed legislation canceling a pilot program developed under former President George W. Bush to allow Mexican trucks to operate in the United States.

U.S. lawmakers said they killed the program because of safety concerns, but Mexican officials said the real reason was U.S. protectionism.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has been leading the Obama administration's effort to come up with a new proposal that would open the border to Mexican trucks.

"We look forward to looking at what they present to us," Paz said, noting that Mexico would like to see its tariffs lifted because they increase the cost of the imported goods.

The duties range from 10 to 45 percent on about \$1.56 billion worth of U.S. manufactured goods and \$892 million of agricultural goods, based on 2007 trade volumes.

'THE U.S. HAS TO KEEP ITS WORD'

Frank Vargo, vice president for international economic affairs at the National Association of Manufacturers, said his group had no intention of living indefinitely with Mexican duties that put 14,000 U.S. manufacturing jobs at risk.

"Simply put, the U.S. has to keep its word. How can we ask other countries to meet their obligations when we refuse to meet ours?" added Adrean Rothkopf, vice president for Western Hemisphere affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Meanwhile, both Paz and Lynn McDonald, a top trade official at Canada's embassy in Washington, said they welcomed U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk's statement on Monday that the United States did not want to renegotiate NAFTA even though Obama often said that during last year's campaign.

Kirk said the Obama administration believed it could update NAFTA without formally re-opening talks on the pact.

But Paz highlighted a difference of view over Obama's goal of putting enforceable labor and environmental provisions into the "core text" of the agreement.

The United States and Mexico negotiated separate labor and environmental pacts to overcome opposition in the U.S. Congress to passing NAFTA in 1993, he said.

Mexico's legislature approved those measures, so from its perspective the labor and environmental provisions are already in the core text of NAFTA, even if they are considered side agreements in the United States, Paz said.