

USTR's Kirk: Will Start Review Of Colombia FTA Immediately

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WASHINGTON (Dow Jones)--U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk announced plans Monday to immediately start reviewing the Colombia and Panama free trade agreements to resolve the outstanding issues before the deals can be submitted for a vote in Congress.

Kirk, speaking to reporters on a call to discuss the Summit of the Americas conference over the weekend, also said he believes the North American Free Trade Agreement could be improved without a full reopening of the trade pact.

"The president has said we will look at all of our options, but I think they can be addressed without reopening the agreement," said Kirk.

Strengthening the labor and environmental provisions of Nafta was a major plank in President Barack Obama's campaign last fall, but he has since taken a more pragmatic stance on the issue.

Kirk said he believes Canada and Mexico agree on the need to strengthen the trade pact.

Meanwhile, the administration has said it would like to address some shortcomings in the Colombia and Panama deals before sending them up to Congress for passage.

Kirk cited "remarkable progress" in reducing violence in Colombia, but said a number of issues still need to be resolved that he plans to discuss with Colombia and congressional leaders.

For Panama, the remaining issues revolve around international labor standards and of the country "possibly being a tax haven," he said.

A high-level delegation from Panama will visit Washington this week to discuss the trade deal, he said.