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FREE TRADE

House passes CAFTA to give Bush big win

In a major victory for President Bush, the House of Representatives passed the CAFTA-DR free-trade pact in a 217-215 vote.

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WASHINGTON - With President Bush's future trade and political agenda for Latin America on the line, the CAFTA-DR free-trade pact passed in a 217-215 cliffhanger vote late Wednesday.

Only 15 Democrats supported the trade pact and 27 Republicans opposed a bill that had become a test of President Bush's ability to lead Congress in his second term.

The House opened debate on the measure on a day that began with Bush going to Congress to lobby House Republicans for the pact -- the most contentious free-trade agreement to come to the floor since the North American Free Trade Agreement a decade ago.

"It will be a tough vote but we'll pass CAFTA tonight," House Majority Leader Rep. Tom DeLay had said after Bush asked the GOP members to keep in mind the broad national-security implications of the pact when they voted on it, rather than the narrower constituency considerations.

The agreement with five Central American nations and the Dominican Republic has grown in recent months far beyond its status as a trade pact that allows more goods and services to flow between the seven members.

The agreement became a litmus test for the Bush administration's ability to pass even more controversial trade deals like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and part of the president's argument that the U.S. government must help spread democracy around the world, including Latin America. Bush's rare personal appearance in Congress and the House leadership's work Wednesday were focused on keeping GOP votes against CAFTA-DR at a minimum, since Democrats were unusually united in their opposition to the pact.

Some Republican members balked at supporting the pact because it would allow for additional sugar imports from the Latin American member nations -- a challenge to the powerful U.S. sugar industry based partly in Florida.

But the administration appears to have made few concessions to the sugar lobby. "We . . . frankly don't believe that it is fair to hold up an agreement . . . for one industry that has a concern that we do not believe is grounded," Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutiérrez told reporters before the vote.

The Bush visit marked the culmination of a full-court press by the administration in recent weeks. The pact was negotiated a year ago but was not sent to Congress for its approval because of fears of rejection. The Senate passed the agreement last month. The legislatures of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have ratified the agreement.

Bush has met with small groups of lawmakers in the White House and twice addressed the 34-member Organization of American States, asking for support. Vice President Dick Cheney stayed in the House late into the night to convince wavering legislators, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also went to Capitol Hill on Wednesday to urge passage, joining other Cabinet-level officials who had spent weeks talking

to legislators.

Gutiérrez has met with more than 160 members and U.S. Trade Representative Bob Portman visited Congress almost daily in recent weeks, his office said.

They argued the pact would benefit U.S. exporters and lower illegal immigration by creating more jobs in Central America and the Dominican Republic.

On the floor, the debate often became passionate, with CAFTA-DR supporters warned of dire consequences if the pact failed.

"Deprive Central America of economic opportunities and we run the risk of a return to authoritarian regimes and a rising tide of illegal immigration from people without jobs and without hope," said Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz.. He said "no one stands to gain more from a defeat of CAFTA" than Venezuela's left-wing president Hugo Chávez, a sharp critic of the Bush administration.

But Democrats said the labor, environmental and other provisions were too weak and one by one they came out against the treaty. They cast the treaty in doomsday terms and said the administration and its congressional allies were bullying skeptical lawmakers into approving the agreement.

"When the facts fail, they twist arms . . . they buy votes," said Rep. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio.

Rep. Robert Menéndez, D-N.J., said the agreement would "widen the gap between haves and have not, weaken labor and environmental standards and sets a dangerous precedent for future trade agreements."

South Florida Democrat Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz announced her opposition, saying the labor-enforcement provisions had "gaping loopholes through which too many workers could fall."