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COSTA RICA

Costa Rica requests trade-pact delay

Although Costa Rica approved CAFTA late last year, it said it still hasn't passed necessary accompanying laws.

By Marianela Jimenez

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica --

President Oscar Arias said Tuesday he will ask the United States to delay implementation of a free-trade agreement to give the country time to pass several necessary local laws.

Costa Rica approved the Central American Free Trade Agreement in October, but its Congress has only passed four of 13 laws needed to launch it, Arias told Channel 7 news.

The deadline for implementation is Feb. 29, and Arias acknowledged that his administration would not be ready by that date.

"It is obvious that we aren't going to be able to go ahead, and that in the month of February we will have to ask for an extension," he said.

Costa Rica is the only one of the six countries in the region that has not yet ratified the treaty. The pact already has taken effect in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Only a thin majority of Costa Ricans backed the pact in a national referendum on Oct. 7. Arias signed it into law in November.

The White House fought a bruising battle to get the deal ratified by the U.S. Congress in 2005, when it passed the House of Representatives by just two votes.

Among laws that still require approval in Costa Rica are the strengthening and modernizing of state telecommunications monopolies.

Arias estimated that lawmakers would need until at least the second half of February, but said to know for sure, he would need to speak with congressional leaders.