

# The Commercial Appeal

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## City, state have big stake in Colombia FTA

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Special to Viewpoint

By road, rail, air or water, all roads lead to Memphis. The River City knows that today those roads don't end at our borders and we must do everything we can to be competitive in an increasingly global marketplace. We can help do that through the passage of the free trade agreement with Colombia awaiting a vote in Congress now.

Memphis is one of the nation's largest inland ports and the center of a global transportation network with the largest air cargo facility in the world. U.S. air freight delivery companies like FedEx depend on global access to grow and prosper.

Exporters in Memphis, like those around the country, increasingly drive our nation's economy. Last year, trade was responsible for 26 percent of America's growth, and we exported a record \$1.6 trillion. Tennessee companies exported nearly \$22 billion last year, a tremendous 73 percent increase since 2003. Not only is this region a transportation logistics hub - an "aerotropolis" - it is a center for world-class biotech research, computer and electronics, paper processing and crop production.

The Colombia free trade agreement (FTA) will further enhance Tennessee's competitiveness and level the playing field for Tennessee's exporters. For more than 16 years Congress has given more than 90 percent of Colombian imports duty-free access to the American market, while American exporters to Colombia still pay hundreds of millions in tariffs each year. The FTA would make trade with Colombia a two-way street, benefiting America's businesses, farmers and workers.

Last year, Tennessee's exports to Colombia totaled \$151 million. That's up more than 124 percent from just two years earlier and is across a wide range of sectors, including \$67 million in computers and electronics exports, \$18 million in chemicals and more than \$14 million in transportation equipment.

Tennessee's farmers, who already ship \$18 million in crops and food products to Colombia, will benefit tremendously from this agreement. Colombia is already the largest market for American agriculture products in South America; however, with the FTA our farmers, food processors and manufacturers will be even more competitive. For example, with the FTA, Colombia will immediately eliminate its 80 percent duty on prime and choice cuts of beef, as well as duties on poultry products. Additionally, tariffs will be lowered on nearly all Tennessee agriculture exports to Colombia including soybeans, cotton, corn and tobacco.

While the economic case is clear, from a security, foreign policy and social justice perspective there is also no excuse not to pass this agreement now.

The Colombia agreement is critical for our national and economic security. Regional stability demands that we support Colombia as it fights terrorism. We have just returned from visiting Medellin with a bipartisan congressional delegation. We saw children playing on streets that were once controlled by drug lords. We also met with paramilitaries who have laid down their arms and rejoined civil society. We saw firsthand the progress this country has made, as well as the need for our ongoing support.

Others in the region who have a very different vision for this hemisphere will be looking closely at what we do in Colombia. They don't share our views on freedom, open markets and trade, and they will watch carefully to see if we turn our backs on an ally.

A decade ago Colombia was on the brink of becoming a failed state. Today, under democratically elected President Alvaro Uribe, and with the assistance of America's \$5.5 billion bipartisan investment, Plan Colombia, the country has made a tremendous turnaround.

Since 2002 kidnappings are down by 76 percent, terror attacks by 61 percent and homicides by 40 percent; and since 2000, the number of Colombians living in poverty has been reduced 25 percent.

America's global leadership is at stake. Will we stay at the forefront, breaking down barriers to trade and commerce, and spreading democracy, prosperity and hope? Or will we turn back to a time of economic isolationism?

Tennessee has realized the benefits of being open and engaged with the world. The free trade agreement with Colombia will further those benefits and ensure that American products, services and people stay competitive in the global economy.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez and U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, a Tennessee Republican, returned March 2 from a three-day visit to Medellin, Colombia. For more information on the Colombia free trade agreement, visit [export.gov/FTA/Colombia/State](http://export.gov/FTA/Colombia/State).

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Approval by Congress of the free trade agreement with Colombia will enhance our area's competitiveness and level the playing field for Tennessee's exporters.