



## **Message to House: Free the Colombia Trade Agreement**

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*By John Murphy,  
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One month ago, on April 10, the House of Representatives voted to shelve the U.S.-Colombia trade promotion agreement, tossing aside Congressional rules dating back to 1974 that ensure an up-or-down vote on trade agreements.

Since then, people from all walks of life — across the United States and throughout the Americas — have urged Congress to reverse course and approve the agreement. Their reasons are simple: This “fair trade” agreement is overwhelmingly in the interests of American workers, and it’s critical to the foreign policy interests of the United States.

More than 70 leading U.S. newspapers published editorials criticizing the House action to deny an up-or-down vote on the trade agreement with Colombia and urging its approval.

The decision to not even consider the Colombia agreement comes despite widespread support: 1,000 companies, business organizations, farm and ranch groups, and chambers of commerce from across the United States signed a joint letter calling for swift approval of the agreement.

More importantly, this decision amounts to renegeing on the agreement brokered nearly one year ago, on May 10, 2007, between Congressional leaders and the administration to include enforceable environmental and labor provisions in the pending free-trade agreements with Peru, Colombia, Panama and South Korea. This bipartisan deal was intended to break a decade-long stalemate on these provisions and ignite action on the stalled agreements.

Despite these expectations, the Peru agreement sat, gathering dust for months until it received approval last December.

Yet when the administration sent implementing legislation for the Colombia trade agreement to Congress this spring, the House changed the rules of the game. Completely overlooked was the fact that the trade agreement with Colombia includes the exact same guarantees for worker rights and environmental protection as the Peru agreement, which in the end was approved by a huge bipartisan majority.

As U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab has pointed out, “They changed the rules not only for themselves but also for the Senate, for the administration, for the United States, and for our Colombian allies, unilaterally upending 34 years of U.S. trade law, policy and practice.”

And make no mistake, the House's surprising action on an important trade bill has reverberated throughout the world.

Throughout the Americas, the House action has been questioned as the most worrisome sign yet of creeping U.S. isolationism. At a North American Summit in New Orleans, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Calderón urged the United States to follow their governments' example and enact its own trade agreement with Colombia. Harper worried that rejection of the Colombia free-trade agreement will have long-term security consequences for the region, while Calderón praised the agreement as practical and beneficial for everyone.

Furthermore, ministers of foreign affairs and trade from 10 Latin American countries — Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Colombia — issued a powerful statement in mid-April calling for approval of the U.S.-Colombia agreement.

Of course, the House action resonated most forcefully in Colombia. Colombia Speaker Oscar Arboleda Palacio wrote to Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) that her chamber's vote was "a blow to the Colombian economy, and affords colonial treatment to us that is unbecoming to one of the United States' staunchest allies."

El Tiempo, Colombia's leading daily newspaper, editorialized that "the decision is tremendously unfair toward a government [in Colombia] that has been the strongest ally of the Bush administration in the region, has made enormous sacrifices in the fight against narco-trafficking and has aligned itself — not without benefits — with the U.S. in the war on terror."

The case for approval is strong. By sweeping aside trade barriers, the agreement will offer significant new opportunities to working Americans on factory floors as well as Colombians rescuing their nation from drug violence. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that American workers and farmers will see more than \$4 billion in new sales to Colombia.

The agreement is a helping hand for one of America's closest allies in Latin America. Violence in the country is at its lowest level in a generation. The agreement offers Colombians a chance to build on their remarkable progress over the past decade in securing democracy, human rights and economic growth.

What possible benefit can there be in Congress by simply allowing this trade agreement to die, to forgo its economic benefits and to alienate a close ally? The House should free this agreement from legislative limbo, give it the up-or-down vote it deserves, and approve the U.S.-Colombia trade promotion agreement.

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