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EDITORIAL

Lift barriers

Our position: Florida is missing out as Congress delays approval of trade deals.

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For months now, Congress has been stalling trade agreements between the United States and Peru, Panama, Colombia and South Korea. The delay is especially unfortunate for Florida.

International trade and investment support hundreds of thousands of jobs in the Sunshine State and generate billions of dollars in business each year for its companies and farmers. Almost 29,000 companies in Florida sold their products abroad in 2005. Nearly a fifth of revenues for Florida farms that year came from exports. And foreign companies with operations here employ more than 200,000 state residents.

More agreements to lower barriers to trade and investment will create more jobs and economic opportunities in Florida and across the country, while lowering prices and expanding choices for consumers. Increased trade has helped the U.S. economy grow more than 40 percent over the past decade.

Florida's exports to countries that have signed trade agreements with the United States have jumped since those deals took effect. The state's exports to Chile have climbed 50 percent since 2004. Exports to Canada and Mexico have soared 145 percent since 1994. And exports to Central America and the Dominican Republic already are up 14 percent over a year ago.

But protectionists in Congress have been holding up the four pending agreements, contending they would hurt the U.S. economy. In fact, the deals with Peru, Panama and Colombia would give U.S. companies the same market access to those countries that their exporters already enjoy in the United States. The agreement with South Korea would open the world's 11th-largest economy to U.S. companies. Notably, it would lower barriers to U.S. auto exports.

Earlier this year, the White House made a deal with Democratic leaders in Congress to secure approval for the agreements with Peru and Panama, and boost the prospects for the ones with Colombia and South Korea, by adding more labor and environmental protections to them. But the Democrats have backed off that deal.

None of the pending agreements is ideal for the United States -- that's the nature of the negotiating process. While many U.S. companies will thrive with greater access to international markets, some will struggle with increased competition from abroad. A bipartisan Senate proposal would double spending for a program to assist workers who lose their jobs with enhanced unemployment benefits and job training. It would make more workers eligible, not just those in manufacturing.

That proposal deserves approval, along with the four trade agreements. Given all the benefits that would come to Florida, the state's members of Congress from both parties should be at the head of the parade for passage.