

## **CONGRESS SHOULD PASS TRADE AGREEMENTS**

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Florida is America's gateway to the Western Hemisphere, and Greater Miami has reaped the rewards of increased global engagement. Trade has energized the region's economy and created a flood of new opportunities that have grown Florida's exports.

Now is the time to open the gates further with three critical free trade agreements pending before Congress with Colombia, Panama and South Korea. The United States is the world's largest exporting nation, with \$1.6 trillion in exports last year. With 25 percent of economic growth in 2007 coming from international trade, the benefits of open markets are increasingly important to stabilizing and strengthening our nation's economy.

According to recently released Commerce Department statistics, Florida is the largest exporter in the southeast with \$45 billion in exports in 2007 - an 80 percent increase since 2003. The South Florida metro area accounts for 65 percent of Florida's exports. While that is impressive, the future holds even greater promise. When Congress passes these FTAs, Florida's citrus, machinery, software and technology exports will have increased access to countries with a combined GDP of \$1 trillion and 100 million consumers.

For economic, security and humanitarian reasons, perhaps the most important of these agreements, particularly for Miami, is Colombia. In 2006, Greater Miami exported more than \$1.3 billion to Colombia. However, exporters here could be doing even better.

For 17 years, Congress has granted one-way free trade to Colombia. Virtually all of Colombia's exports enter the United States duty free, while virtually all American exports to Colombia pay hundreds of millions in duties each year.

Companies here, both big and small, will benefit from these FTAs. Companies like Citrix Systems, Inc., a Fort Lauderdale-based global technology leader, and other American companies will benefit from both tariff elimination on goods and services exports and increased protections for intellectual property and investors that FTAs provide.

Although increased competitiveness is one critical reason for these FTAs, it is not the only one. FTAs give the United States an opportunity to strengthen relationships with key allies and democracies in critical regions. These countries have shown a willingness to compete on an even playing field and open up their markets. This is critical in a world where fair play and economic openness cannot always be taken for granted.

Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, FTAs strengthen social justice, democracy and security, particularly in this hemisphere. There is perhaps no better example of a country - or an agreement - that can help us secure these key foreign policy objectives than Colombia.

Colombia is one of our staunchest allies in the region - a country not long ago that was on the brink of becoming a failed state. Today, under democratically elected President Uribe, and through our bipartisan Plan Colombia initiative started under President Clinton, Colombia has made a tremendous turnaround. I've seen it myself, in places like Medellin, which was once the world's murder capital and is now thriving, growing and prospering.

Colombia's stability is a concern for all of us - not just to Colombians or the nearly quarter-million Colombian-Americans in Florida who overwhelmingly want this FTA, but also to those concerned about the spread of stability and social justice in our own hemisphere.

These three agreements are the right thing to do for our country, and now is the right time to get them done. When we do, we'll make South Florida better off and help ensure that American products, businesses, farmers and workers are more competitive and successful in the global economy.

Carlos M. Gutierrez is U.S. Secretary of Commerce.