

Orlando Sentinel

EDITORIAL

Strengthen ties

Our position: It's critical for Sen. Nelson to support trade agreement with Colombia

February 14, 2008

President George W. Bush has been stepping up his campaign lately for Congress to pass a free-trade agreement with Colombia. He deserves an enthusiastic assist from Florida's delegation.

Trade supports hundreds of thousands of jobs in the state, and Florida accounted for almost a quarter of U.S. exports to Colombia in 2006 -- \$1.6 billion worth. History suggests a free-trade deal would boost the total. Florida's exports to Chile shot up 73 percent in the three years after a free-trade pact with that country took effect.

The trade deal with Colombia also would serve the broader national interest. It would put U.S. businesses and their workers, and U.S. farmers, on an equal footing with their Colombian counterparts, who have been given duty-free access to the U.S. market for years. It would strengthen ties with Colombia and enhance U.S. influence in Latin America at a time when it is being aggressively challenged by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

Critics of the Colombia deal have cited violence against union members there as a reason to reject it. But violence has come down under President Alvaro Uribe. Spurning Colombia on trade would undercut U.S. leverage in pressing for more progress.

Among Florida's senators, Republican Mel Martinez has endorsed the agreement. Democrat Bill Nelson, who has voted for other trade deals, hasn't made up his mind on this one. With Congress under the control of Democrats, his support is crucial. So is the backing of Florida's Democratic House members.