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W.Va. benefits from free trade

West Virginians like the fact that their little piece of heaven is a welcome respite from a busy world. But make no mistake. West Virginia is thoroughly enmeshed in a booming global trade, and its fortunes are increasingly linked to expanded trade opportunities.

Congressional Democrats will soon face decisions on whether to approve trade agreements with Peru, Colombia, Panama and South Korea. Surely the West Virginia delegation will vote to expand West Virginians' opportunities worldwide.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which speaks for businesses, fleshes out a powerful case that trade agreements are critical to the people of this state.

West Virginia exported more than \$3 billion worth of manufactured goods in 2006, and that trade was not a matter of a few multinationals at work.

The chamber says almost 850 companies in West Virginia exported goods in 2005, and more than 70 percent of those companies had 500 or fewer employees.

West Virginia's agricultural exports in 2006 were worth more than \$39 million, with poultry products accounting for \$21 million of that.

The chamber says West Virginia-produced manufactured goods generated more than 20,900 jobs for workers in West Virginia in 2005. Furthermore, 19,000 jobs in West Virginia come from foreign companies operating here.

Top West Virginia exporters?

Chemical manufacturing at \$1.3 billion, mining at \$544 million, transportation equipment at \$337 million, machinery at \$389 million and metals at \$272 million.

About 96 percent of the world's consumers live outside the United States. Ducking the competition and retreating into protectionism simply won't work.

Full engagement with the world serves West Virginia far better.

Take, for example, the effect that great bugaboo, NAFTA, has had on West Virginia.

Since 1994, the year the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect, West Virginia exports have increased by 218 percent, the chamber said.

Economies are dynamic. Things change. The truth is, the state will benefit more from free trade than it could ever preserve with protectionist measures.