

ROLL CALL

CAFTA: A Hot Recess Topic

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Backers, Opponents Go to Grass Roots Over Holiday

On the heels of a Senate vote that both sides of the prickly debate over the Central American Free Trade Agreement claimed buoyed their cause, lobbying groups said they planned to use the July Fourth recess to turn Members their way as the measure awaits a House vote.

Chris Slevin of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch said that his anti-CAFTA organization will make sure its message reaches Members and voters alike over the recess. The schedule includes town halls and rallies in Members' districts, including events in Raleigh, N.C., San Diego and Little Rock, Ark.

At July Fourth parades and other public events, Public Citizen planned to have volunteers mobilized to pass out anti-CAFTA literature, he said.

"Right now is the peak of outside-the-Beltway media and ads," Slevin said. "We'll be using the opportunities that the holiday weekend provides for getting out more public information, including how to contact your Member of Congress."

And Tom Buis, vice president of government relations for the National Farmers Union, said, "We're encouraging all our state organizations to make contact with their Congressmen when they're back home, and to again express their opposition to CAFTA."

Chances are that Slevin's and Buis' associates will bump into representatives from opposing groups as they crisscross the country.

Tita Thompson, spokeswoman for the Business Roundtable, said her group, which has made enacting CAFTA a top priority, plans to "be very aggressively meeting with Members on the House side over the next several weeks. ... We want to get this done by the end of July."

Over the recess, BRT plans to dispatch its CEO members around the country to voice their support, she said.

Some of the targets of both sides include Reps. Mark Foley (R-Fla.), Mark Kennedy (R-Minn.) and Gil Gutknecht (R-Minn.), among others.

Adam Kovacevich, communications director for the Information Technology Industry Council, said his group's members plan to blanket the states they consider key, including Washington, Oregon, California, Texas, Utah and Tennessee.

"One of the arguments we're making is that we estimate passing CAFTA would increase U.S. high-tech exports by 11 percent to the CAFTA countries," said Kovacevich.

Rep. Clay Shaw (R-Fla.) — who chairs the Ways and Means Committee, which last week passed CAFTA out of the committee — said he senses strong momentum in the House.

"I really wish we were going to be in the House [this] week ... to build on the momentum in the Senate," he said. "If the pro-CAFTA people do their job and talk to Members over the July Fourth recess, we'll maintain that momentum."

Shaw said he expects a vote within the first few weeks after the recess.

"We're continuing to build our support, and I think we're just about there," Shaw added.

While the agreement is about free trade, Shaw said the real motivator for many Members is global security.

"We want the seeds of democracy to really flourish in Central America" — and that can't happen, he said, if Congress "slams the door" on CAFTA.

Rep. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who opposes the agreement, said the recess will only hurt the measure's chances, no matter how much pro-CAFTA lobbyists pound the pavement.

"The only people that support CAFTA are Republican politicians, large corporate interests and newspaper publishers and a few corporate farmers," Brown said. "So when Members go home, they start hearing from workers and small manufacturers and religious groups" to vote no.

On June 30, the Senate voted 54-45 to approve CAFTA, and Brown said that wasn't enough to aid the measure in his chamber.

"Any artificially created momentum for CAFTA ground to a screeching halt. They expected to get 60, and they got 54," he said.

Brown surmised that the pro-CAFTA side is short by at least 10 votes in the House. "If there's a vote, they'll bring it up in the middle of the night. And if it passes at all, it'll pass by no more than two or three votes," he said.

Kevin Kearns, president of the anti- CAFTA U.S. Business and Industry Council, said the Senate's vote "makes our job easier in one sense."

The vote, he said, exposes those Senators who "sold out for nothing — a couple of dollars on labor rights promises or a non-existent sugar deal. And you expose these guys for standing there with a fig leaf."

On the other hand, the Senators who stood firm, Kearns said, will receive positive feedback in their states.

"You go to House delegations and say, 'If you sell out like Sen. X did, we intend to expose you the same way.' In contrast, we are praising Sens. X, Y and Z for holding firm, and we will do the same for you," he explained.

Phillip Hayes of the American Sugar Alliance said despite Senators' claims that sugar interests had reached a deal on CAFTA, "there is no deal."

Hayes added: "What they were talking about on the Senate floor [on June 30] is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. It's a short-term fix to a long-term permanent problem."

The sugar industry group will continue to work against CAFTA, he said.

"We've been very aggressive for a year and will continue to be very aggressive, reaching out to every sugar state lawmaker and making sure they know that a vote for CAFTA is a vote to send constituents to the unemployment line."

No matter the margins of the Senate vote, ITI's Kovacevich and other CAFTA supporters said what really matters is what states the supporters hailed from, such as North Carolina and Florida.

"Having one or both Senators' support for this deal can help persuade an undecided [House] Member that passing CAFTA is in the state's best interest," he said.

Mark Smith, managing director of Western Hemisphere Affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said getting CAFTA passed out of the Senate before a Supreme Court nominee fight was itself a positive step. Smith also said his side is confident about the House because both Florida Senators and one from Minnesota, where anti-CAFTA sugar interests weighed heavily, gave CAFTA a thumbs-up.

But Ernest Baynard of Americans for Fair Trade, which opposes CAFTA, said the agreement's prospects in the House are bleak.

"CAFTA took some jabs in the Senate, but the main event is in the House, and it's going to take some body blows," he said.