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TRADE

State Ag Directors Vote To Oppose CAFTA

Despite a plea from the Bush administration, state agriculture directors last month went on record against the Central America Free Trade Agreement.

Although proponents of CAFTA came within one vote of getting that vote overturned, the group is unlikely to revisit the issue until a scheduled meeting in September, which could be after Congress acts on the trade agreement.

The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture took the position against CAFTA on Feb. 21 after its Marketing and International Trade Committee unanimously adopted a resolution proposed by southern states.

When Allen Johnson, the chief U.S. agriculture negotiator, was alerted to the vote, he addressed the group and asked it not to pass the resolution.

"There was some concern by folks about what the committee had done," said Richard Mills, a spokesman for the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. "The committee hadn't been fully informed and hadn't discussed it fully so Ambassador [Allen] Johnson went and talked to the assembly to provide them the facts about CAFTA. ... Once you have an opportunity to explain what's actually in CAFTA and how it will help American farmers, we see more and more support."

But once proposed by a committee, NASDA requires a two-thirds majority to reject a resolution. And of the 38 commissioners who voted, only 25 voted to overturn it, one short of the 26 votes that were needed, according to NASDA Executive Vice President Richard Kirchhoff.

Four more commissioners were present but chose not to vote, which hurt the chances of CAFTA supporters, Kirchhoff noted, adding that the vote "exposed the very deep split" in the country over CAFTA.

Oregon Agriculture Commissioner Katy Coba presented a pro-CAFTA motion to the assembly, but it also failed to get the necessary two-thirds majority. Kirchhoff said no pro-CAFTA motion was offered in the trade committee.

North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson, a CAFTA opponent, said some commissioners who are appointed by governors might not have known how to vote on the resolution in the assembly.

An aide to Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charlie Bronson, who chairs the NASDA trade committee and supported the anti-CAFTA resolution, said one of Bronson's concerns is that **the United States is entering into too many trade agreements.**

By Jerry Hagstrom