

# Free trade proposal's flip side

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Pollution, pesticides possible problems

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WASHINGTON — Many business and political leaders are touting the proposed U.S.-Mexico free trade agreement as if it were the best thing to hit Texas since bottled picante sauce.

But before too many Texans jump blindly on the booster bandwagon, lured by visions of dollar signs dancing in their heads, environmental groups and organized labor are scrambling to spread the other, not-so-pretty side of the story.

They claim the agreement could worsen pollution problems already plaguing the U.S.-Mexico border, lead to pesticide hazards on fruits and vegetables coming from Mexico and result in lost jobs and lower wages for workers throughout the United States.

Organized labor and environmental groups are trying to balance the rosy picture painted by free trade supporters before Congress later this month rushes into giving the Bush administration authority to use a "fast track" in negotiating the agreement.

Going along with President Bush's fast track request would give the administration wide latitude in negotiating the agreement and greatly limit congressional involvement. And if Congress has little say in the matter, it's a safe bet the public will have no say, the groups fear.

Administration officials have expressed doubt as to whether a free trade agreement could be successfully negotiated if Congress rejects

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the fast track. Congress has until Feb. 25 to give thumbs up or down.

Complicating negotiations is the recent initiative to make it a three-way free trade pact with the United States, Mexico and Canada. A U.S.-Canada free trade zone already exists.

"Disapproval of negotiations under fast track is necessary to insure that this country's relationship with Mexico receives the attention and examination it deserves," the AFL-CIO said in a prepared statement released just before a Senate hearing last week.

Mary Kelly, executive director of the Texas Center for Policy Studies, a non-profit group that studies environmental and economic issues, said the groups voicing concerns are opposed to the fast track approach, not necessarily the free trade agreement itself.

Kelly explained that environmental and labor activists might support the pact if adequate safeguards are incorporated. The problem is they don't believe negotiators will address their concerns under fast track procedures.

She and others involved in the effort say that U.S. and Mexican government and business officials made repeated assurances they would safeguard the environment as they developed the *maquiladora*, or twin-plant, industry along the nations' joint border.

But investigations show the plants have greatly compounded border pollution problems by dumping untreated sewage and other contaminants into waterways and spewing out tons of toxic emissions into the air.

Craig Merriees, spokesman for the National Toxics Campaign, said, "If you're wondering how the free trade agreement will affect environmental problems, look at the environmental mess created by the *maquiladora* industry."

Merriees said hundreds of *maquiladoras* have been set up, most owned by U.S. firms, because the owners "want cheap labor as lax environmental regulations. They have found plenty of both in Mexico. The *maquiladoras* are poisoning their workers inside the plants while polluting rivers and drinking water with toxic waste."

Texas environmentalists found it interesting that Houston Mayor Kathy Whitmire wrapped up a trade delegation visit to Mexico last week by proclaiming that Houston supports the proposed agreement and declaring that the opposition will come from labor groups in other parts of the country.

The activists said Whitmire and the rest of the delegation should brace for some opposition in their own back yard, not just from out of state.

"This is much broader an issue that just labor in other states," Kelly cautioned.

Besides pollution, environmental groups are focusing on the potential free trade effects on food product safety.

A free trade pact likely would give Mexican fruit and vegetable

producers much greater access to U.S. markets.

Johnny Porch, president of the National Family Farm Coalition, said, "The so-called 'harmonization' of chemical-residue standards will allow imported products to contain much higher levels of dangerous contaminants than are allowed here."

Under the auspices of free trade, Porch said, "it will be considered a trade barrier to try to prohibit food imports carrying DDT or other chemicals that are banned domestically as long as those imports meet international standards" that are more lax than U.S. guidelines.

Concerning labor, the chief concerns are that the low wages paid workers in Mexico will drive down salaries earned by U.S. laborers and that a growing number of U.S. companies will be lured by lower overhead costs to relocate south of the border.

The AFL-CIO stated in a position paper that free trade "will encourage greater capital outflows from the U.S., bring about an increase in imports from Mexico, reduce U.S. employment and further

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economics researcher

harm the U.S. industrial base. As this country moves deeper into a recession, these problems will only grow in seriousness."

David Williams, a senior economics research fellow with the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, said:

"What U.S. and Canadian labor and environmental groups rightfully fear is that while Mexican wages and standards might tend to rise due to internal as well as external pressure, it is very unlikely that they will approach current U.S. levels in the foreseeable future, even if U.S. salaries shrink and environmental regulations are relaxed to meet the competition."

Williams said he realizes he and other fast track foes are in an uphill fight because political and business heavyweights are pushing for free trade and are enticing Congress to play along by touting potential economic gains.

"They speak of 80 million consumers in Mexico, warning that without free trade, other (countries) would capture this enormous market," Williams said.

"But low-wage markets such as Mexico hardly provide a bonanza. A majority of Mexicans exist in an advanced state of poverty and suffer more from malnutrition than a desire to drive down to the shopping mall."