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# Pensacola conference touts Central American trade

By Melissa Nelson

Associated Press

**PENSACOLA, Fla.** - Years of democratic reforms and the recently signed Central American Free Trade Agreement are luring U.S. investors to Central America, federal and state trade experts said Thursday.

U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Charles Ford was among those who touted trade opportunities at the Gulf States World Trade Conference.

"In a 30-year period there has been an extraordinary amount of progress in Central America. Where the region was 20 or 30 years ago, there was civil war, military governments," Ford said. "I think all of us feel this free trade agreement represents a tremendous amount of opportunity for the region."

The conference, organized by state economic developers and the Pensacola Bay Area Chamber of Commerce, was among a series of similar events held around Florida in recent months promoting CAFTA. The three-day conference began Wednesday.

Florida topped U.S. states in exports to Central America last year, totaling an estimated \$16 billion, said John Adams, executive director of Enterprise Florida, a state organization that promotes trade and business development.

While the bulk of that trade was done by South Florida companies, the Gulf Coast has a long history of trade relationships with Central America and companies from Louisiana to northwest Florida should consider rebuilding those ties, Adams said.

"It's just natural that more people in South Florida are aware of the export opportunities, but there is potential for businesses here," he said.

Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador have fully implemented requirements under the provisions of the CAFTA, which was approved by Congress in July and signed by President Bush in August.

The remaining CAFTA countries, Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic, are still working to implement provisions of the agreement.

The deal is designed to eliminate trade barriers among the participating countries and is part of the Bush administration's push to strike free trade deals with nations around the world as a way of boosting American exports.

Pensacola business owner Bryan Clark came to hear how he might export his check-scanning software Central America, but he said he still had some questions.

"I'm still wondering about how the costs of doing business there versus the return on my investment might compare with India or Europe. I'm a little concerned about intellectual property rights issues, having to charge less for my products and the costs of providing security," he said.

Low education levels, poor infrastructure and lack of legal protections create an obvious risk for American investors in Honduras and elsewhere, Ford said.

But he said smart partnerships with local companies and research can lead to opportunities that were not available before in Central America.

"We've got this incredible market that has been developing for the last 15 years," he said.