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COLOMBIA

Negotiations completed in trade, investment pact

The United States adds Colombia to the list of Andean countries that have finished negotiations for a trade and investment treaty with the United States.

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Colombian and U.S. trade officials finished negotiations for a trade and investment agreement early Monday, following a weekend marathon of talks and a final push from Colombian President Alvaro Uribe.

With the accord, Colombia became the second Andean nation to negotiate a binding trade pact with the United States that makes existing preferential access to U.S. markets permanent. The accord will open Colombian borders to U.S. agricultural products and other goods. Peru finished negotiating a trade and investment agreement late last year.

Florida's trade with Colombia was \$3.9 billion in 2004, the latest yearly statistic available from Enterprise Florida. Colombia shipped about \$400 million of cut flowers to the United States last year, most of them through Miami International Airport. The flower imports already have duty-free access.

U.S. trade officials said the pact will create new opportunities for U.S. farmers and ranchers, with long-term access for American rice, chicken legs, corn, pork and other products.

Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said the agreement was comprehensive, including protection of intellectual property rights for products such as pharmaceuticals, as well as new lower tariffs for some American products, access for American companies to bid on some government projects and lower quotas on Colombian national programming on television and movies.

In this accord, package delivery companies won the ability to have expedited and separate customs procedures. Express packages carrying goods worth less than \$200 will enter duty free, according to a document summing up the accord issued by the Colombian government.

Other details of the agreement, which may face an uphill battle for approval, weren't made available Monday.

Last week, the Colombian Catholic Church called on Uribe to refrain from signing a trade agreement if it was "unsatisfactory" or "inequitable."

The agreement also could arrive in the U.S. Congress just before November's midterm elections.

Already the U.S. sugar industry has voiced concerns about greater access for Colombian sugar.

"It seems to me there is the makings of a coalition of opposition which will be that much stronger because they want to deal a blow to President Bush," said Gary Hufbauer, a trade economist at the Institute for International Economics in Washington.

Still, Hufbauer said he believed the Bush administration would prevail.

In 2005, U.S. exports to Colombia were worth \$5.4 billion, while imports from Colombia reached a total of \$8.8 billion.

Oil imports accounted for \$5 billion of the total, according to Charles W. McMillion, president of MBG Information Services in Washington. Other leading U.S. exports were machinery and chemicals.