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## FREE TRADE

# CAFTA opponents believe they have enough votes

**Opponents of the Central American Free Trade Agreement say they have enough votes to kill the deal; supporters are ready to put up a fight.**

BY JIM ABRAMS

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON** - Opponents of a free-trade agreement with six Central American and Caribbean countries said Wednesday they have the votes to kill the deal when it comes up for a House vote. Supporters declared they have just begun to fight.

Rep. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, an opponent, said that if a vote were held now on the Central American Free Trade Agreement, 195 Democrats and more than 60 Republicans would reject it, well more than enough to defeat the measure in the 435-member House.

"If CAFTA weren't so wrong-headed and opposition to it so deep, Congress would have voted on the bill shortly after the president signed it" last May, Brown told a large anti-CAFTA gathering including farm-state lawmakers from both parties, Democrats with ties to organized labor, and groups representing agriculture, labor, religious, human rights and environmental interests.

House Republican leaders, meanwhile, held a strategy meeting with business groups, ambassadors and administration officials -- including Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez -- to discuss how they are going to win the vote that the leadership says they would like to hold next month.

"We know this is going to be a tough fight," said Zoellick, the former U.S. Trade Representative. But he noted that opponents had predicted they would be able to kill past trade bills that eventually passed, including legislation giving the president "fast track" negotiating authority. "This process hasn't really started."

Rep. Kevin Brady, R-Texas, the GOP's point man on the bill, also discounted Brown's numbers. "At the end of the day, when the facts get known, we'll get the votes."

Backers of the trade agreement with Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, say it would be a big win for American producers, with 80 percent of U.S. exports of consumer, industrial and farm goods becoming duty free immediately.

They note that the agreement would be a boon for America's beleaguered textile industry because Central American textile factories, unlike those in China, use a large amount of U.S.-produced yarn and fabric in their goods.

But opponents point to the loss of American jobs and soaring U.S. trade deficit following past trade deals such as the NAFTA agreement with Canada and Mexico, and say the agreement would benefit international corporations at the expense of poor subsistence farmers in Central America. They also say the pact's labor and environmental provisions are weak and will lead to abuses.

The sugar industry has led the charge against the measure, saying imports from the six CAFTA nations, while amounting to only 1.7 percent of U.S. consumption after 15 years, would set a dangerous precedent.

Montana's Republican senator, Conrad Burns, and its sole representative, Republican Dennis Rehberg, said

it would destroy their state's sugarbeet industry.

A Senate Finance Committee hearing on the agreement last week revealed strong resistance among senators, who generally are more sympathetic to free trade agreements than their House colleagues.