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TRADE

Andean trade negotiators meet in Miami for talks

Trade talks with three Andean countries get underway in downtown Miami, but for free-trade supporters the key issue in town is still the Congressional vote on the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

BY JANE BUSSEY

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As trade negotiators from the United States and three South American countries wrangled over the fine points of a potential Andean accord in Miami Tuesday, lobbyists at a local forum tried to rev up support for another free trade fight -- passing the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

"We need to fight with real bullets; we need to get aggressive; we need to act if we are to win," William Morley, former chief trade lobbyist for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, told an audience at the Hotel InterContinental in downtown Miami.

"Trade is not necessarily popular," he added.

Though Morley was speaking at a U.S. Chamber conference called "Colombia, Ecuador and Peru: On the Road to Free Trade" that was timed to coincide with the Andean Free Trade Agreement talks taking place in downtown Miami this week -- the key topic was CAFTA.

Morley, now senior vice president and managing director with the MWW Group -- a public relations firm in Washington, urged the 30 people at the conference to fight for CAFTA by putting information on their websites and writing letters to newspapers or legislators urging approval of the trade accord between the United States, the Dominican Republic and the five Central American countries of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras.

To make things easy, Morley said, the chamber has copies of letters on its website that are ready to sign and send.

"Pound the table," Morley said. "Put some passion in it."

A vote on CAFTA is scheduled for next week in the House.

Meanwhile, trade negotiators from the United States, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru met from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Hotel InterContinental for the first of five days of trade talks aimed at forging an Andean Free Trade Agreement.

The talks opened in May 2004, and this is the 11th round of negotiations aimed at creating the regional free trade agreement.

The meeting has brought together several hundred private sector executives and congressional representatives from South America as observers and advisors, giving an economic boost to the city and allowing Miami to showcase its position as a hub of the Americas.

The Andean talks have fallen behind the original conclusion date of the end of 2004 but may be completed in the fall.

During the morning conference, trade supporters warned that backers needed to continue working since the

Andean agreement, if completed, would have to be approved during an election year in 2006.

Despite heightened police protection for the trade talks, there were no protests and organizers said they knew of no planned demonstrations from groups opposed to bilateral trade agreements.

But Enrique Daza, who is with the Colombian Action Network Against the Free Trade Accord and the Free Trade Area of the Americas, was in Miami to discuss the downside of free trade for his country.

"On Sunday we are going to publish a huge ad calling for a halt to negotiations and that we carry out consultations," Daza said, citing loss of protection for agricultural products as one concern.

But agricultural talks are not on the table in Miami. The United States is supposed to respond to a proposal from Andean countries that their food safety agencies be able to inspect and give seals of approval to agricultural products for export.