

Bush eyes Aussie trade vote, but not CAFTA-lawmaker

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The White House is pushing Congress to approve a new free trade agreement with Australia this year, but not a more controversial pact with five Central American countries, a lawmaker said Friday.

"Almost the entire USTR (U.S. Trade Representative's office) came up to the (Capitol) Hill to indicate the administration's strong support for action on Australia," Rep. Cal Dooley, a California Democrat, said in remarks to lobbyists and reporters at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"They haven't sent up the USTR team to try to make the case to Congress on passage of CAFTA," the U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement, he said.

Dooley, who has worked with the White House to round up Democratic votes for other trade pacts, also said he doubted President Bush would ask Congress to vote this year on a third new free trade agreement with Morocco.

In the current anti-trade political environment because the economic benefits of the Moroccan agreement are not great enough to risk the chance it would be defeated, Dooley said.

The Bush administration finished negotiations on all three agreements early this year. U.S. labor groups are determined especially to block CAFTA - which includes Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua - on the grounds that its labor provisions are not tough enough.

Likely Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, who has been endorsed by the AFL-CIO, also has criticized CAFTA's labor and environmental provisions as being too weak.

Dooley predicted Congress would approve the U.S.-Australia pact this year by a large bipartisan margin.

But the outlook for CAFTA is far different. "We're not going to be able to put together the majority (for approval) in this session," Dooley said.

That does not mean the agreement is dead if Kerry defeats Bush in the November election, he said.

"In some ways we might be in a better political situation" if Kerry is willing to stand up to the AFL-CIO and push for approval of the agreement, Dooley said.