

Senate Rejects Attempt To Revive Trade Law

Jim Abrams, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Senate on Tuesday rejected a Republican-led attempt to revive a law, last in force four years ago, that made it easier for the president to move free-trade deals through Congress.

The vote was 55-45 to defeat a proposal by Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell to authorize trade promotion authority, also known as "fast track," through 2013.

Fast track was first enacted in 1974 and has been available to every president since then except for Barack Obama. The law last expired in 2007 and the Obama administration, recognizing the strong suspicions of free-trade agreements among congressional Democrats and organized labor, has not pushed to renew it.

Fast track requires that once the president submits a trade agreement to Congress, the House and Senate must consider the deal within 90 days and can only vote to approve or disapprove, without adding amendments.

McConnell offered his proposal as an amendment to legislation that would extend, through mid-2013, parts of a program that assists workers displaced by foreign trade with retraining and financial support. The administration has demanded that Congress consider the worker aid bill before it submits pending free-trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama.

McConnell, R-Ky., said that in the George W. Bush administration, when fast track was in force, trade agreements were negotiated with 17 countries, including the three still waiting for congressional approval. "But without trade promotion authority, the U.S. will likely never agree to another deal again. The unions will make sure of it."

"The reality is trade promotion authority is vital for any president to have," said Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, who served as U.S. trade representative during the George W. Bush administration. "Why? Because if you don't have trade promotion authority, the other countries will not sit down at the table and bargain with you."

But Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., who supports expanded trade, said he opposed the McConnell amendment because it would simply restore the law that existed between 2002 and 2007.

Wyden said that trade relations have changed significantly since 2002 and that there is a need to rewrite the trade negotiating principles that are traditionally incorporated in a fast track law to reflect new trends in digital goods and services, labor and environmental standards, intellectual property protections for pharmaceuticals and fishing rights. He said the Finance Committee, which he is a member of, was interested in looking at the fast track issue.

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Fast track also expired for an eight-year period, from 1994 to 2002. President Bill Clinton and congressional Republicans both wanted the authority but couldn't agree on such negotiating principles as how to deal with labor and environmental issues.

Bush regained the authority in 2002 but only after it squeaked through the House, first on a 215-214 vote and then on a 215-212 vote in its final version. Most Democrats voted against it.

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