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Expert: Congress needs to take action to curb presidential trade power

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Congress needs to reign back the president's ability to use executive actions to direct trade policy, said an official with a libertarian leaning think tank.

Dan Ikenson, director of the center for trade policy studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C., organization, said the measure shouldn't be directed at President Donald Trump, but the executive branch as a whole. Ikenson was in Baton Rouge on Tuesday as part of a trade discussion at the fourth annual Statewide Economic Development Summit.

Trump is using a section of the law to say that U.S. dependence on imported steel is a national security threat as a means of getting better leverage in trade deals with Mexico and Canada and to threaten duties on Japanese and European automakers. But Ikenson said U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Massachusetts Democrat who is one of the front-runners in the race to take on Trump in 2020, has also discussed using executive action against countries on trade.

Warren has said if elected president she wouldn't do trade deals with countries that don't have high labor and environmental standards.

"Congress has the authority to oversee trade policy," Ikenson said.

The U.S. has always needed to import steel. While the country produces 100 million tons annually, it consumes about 130 million tons.

Taking measures to protect the industry is a backward move, Ikenson said, noting that it is no longer the 20th century.

"We need to be looking forward for the economy we have rather than going to bat for these old guard industries," he said.

While there are trade issues between the U.S. and China that deal with tech transfer issues and intellectual property theft, Trump is going about things the wrong way, Ikenson said. He's

started trade disputes with allies such as Mexico, Canada, Japan and Europe, instead of confronting the Chinese with a unified coalition. “We are looking like the bad guys,” he said.

The current trade dispute with China has caused U.S. imports to the country to go down by 13% and led to tariffs on \$250 billion worth of imported goods. A lot of the pain from the trade war has been camouflaged by the overall health of the U.S. economy, Ikenson said.

The Statewide Economic Development Summit, presented by Entergy and eight regional economic development agencies, including the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, GNO Inc., One Acadiana and the Lafayette Economic Development Authority, started Tuesday and concludes Wednesday.