



Congress Unveils Trade Bill Boosting Obama's Pacific Talks

By Carter Dougherty

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Legislation sought by President Barack Obama to boost his trade agenda, including a deal with Pacific nations, was unveiled in Congress with key lawmakers agreeing on a compromise designed to win support from reluctant Democrats.

Senators Orrin Hatch, the Republican chairman of the Finance Committee that oversees trade policy, and Ron Wyden, the panel's top Democrat, on Thursday introduced a bipartisan bill that would let the White House send Congress trade pacts for votes without amendment, known as trade promotion authority. Ways and Means Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, a Wisconsin Republican, introduced the bill in the House.

Wyden, of Oregon, succeeded in adding language giving Congress the right to jettison the so-called fast-track process if enough lawmakers find the president ignored negotiating goals.

"We included new tools to hold the administration accountable, including a procedure that Congress can employ if our trade negotiators fail to consult or make progress toward meeting the negotiating objectives," Hatch, of Utah, said at a committee meeting.

The bill is designed to smooth the way for Congress to approve the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multilateral deal that the Obama administration hopes to complete this year with nations on both sides of the Pacific. The U.S. and the European Union are working on a similar pact.

Obama Agenda

Obama, who had pledged to double U.S. exports when he took office six years ago, said in a statement he was pleased with the legislation.

“I look forward to working with Democrats and Republicans in Congress to pass this bill, seize this opportunity, and support more good American jobs with the wages and benefits hardworking families deserve,” he said.

The legislation also seeks to combat currency manipulation and end barriers to digital trade, according to a statement accompanying the measure.

Hatch has said he will hold a committee hearing April 23 to debate and then vote on advancing the bill.

Six Senate Democrats led by New York’s Charles Schumer, in line to become the Senate’s Democratic leader in 2017, issued a joint statement criticizing Hatch’s timetable for passing the bill.

‘Deliberative’ Process

“Congress should undergo a thorough and deliberative committee process for debating trade agreements,” said the statement. It also was signed by Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, Robert Menendez of New Jersey, Ben Cardin of Maryland, Sherrod Brown of Ohio and Bob Casey of Pennsylvania.

Hinting at opposition from Democrats in the House, Speaker John Boehner challenged Obama to deliver their votes.

“Republicans stand ready to work with President Obama,” Boehner, an Ohio Republican, said in a statement. “He must secure the support from his own party that’s needed to ensure strong, bipartisan passage.”

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which describes itself the nation’s largest business advocacy group, came out in favor of the bill and signaled it would lobby for passage. “With facts and arguments, we’ll win this trade debate,” the Washington-based group said in an e-mail.

The AFL-CIO, the labor federation, vowed to fight passage of the bill. It announced a six-figure ad buy criticizing fast track that will target 16 senators and 36 House members.

The coming Pacific trade deal “should be debated in a full and open manner like every other piece of legislation,” AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said.

60 Days

In response to complaints that negotiations on the Pacific trade pact are being held without congressional oversight, the bill would require accords to be made public at least 60 days before the president signs them, Wyden said. It would also require the administration to publish regular summaries of its proposals and give lawmakers access to the talks.

“All this excessive secrecy accomplishes nothing except make people more cynical and skeptical about trade,” Wyden said. “Congress can put the brakes on a bad deal.”

Wyden said the bill instructs negotiators to include protections for labor rights and environmental protection, as well as promoting the flow of digital information.

“At the core of this agreement is a new mandate for the Open Internet, free speech and digital commerce, by ensuring information can flow freely across national borders over the Internet,” Wyden said in a statement.

Stripping Fast-Track

Stripping the fast-tracked consideration of an accord could occur in either chamber if the committees of jurisdiction -- Finance in the Senate, Ways & Means in the House -- voted a trade deal out of committee with an unfavorable recommendation. That would trigger a resolution to end fast-tracking of the pact, with a majority vote in the House, and 60 votes in the Senate needed to pass the resolution.

Scott Lincicome, an adjunct scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the provision wouldn't boost congressional power to stop a trade deal. “This new provision appears to be nothing more than a face-saving nothingburger,” he said in an e-mail.

Ryan, addressing the bill's provision that would let Congress revoke fast-track consideration, said “it affirms that Congress -- and only Congress -- can change U.S. law. Congress always gets the final say on whether to implement a trade agreement.”

Lawmakers introduced the legislation after reaching agreement on a separate bill to aid workers who lose their job as a result of foreign trade. Some lawmakers want to move the aid bill alongside the fast-track measure.