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U.S. ambassador touts trade at UF

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Critics charge that free trade agreements have contributed to losses in American manufacturing jobs and stagnant wages, but Michael McKinley isn't buying it.

On a stop in Gainesville Monday, where he met with University of Florida faculty, the U.S. ambassador to Peru touted trade with foreign nations - particularly those in Latin America - as crucial to the future of the U.S. economy.

"Essentially, we are now more dependent on world commerce and trade than ever before for our prosperity," McKinley told The Sun. "Last year, 27 percent of our (gross domestic product) was generated by exports and imports. We're locked into the world economy. There's no turning back."

McKinley is on a tour through Florida in support of numerous free trade agreements, including proposed pacts with Colombia, Panama and South Korea.

In his support of free trade, and rebuffing of some of its critics, McKinley cites U.S. State Department figures that say U.S. exports directly support 12 million American jobs that pay between 13 percent and 18 percent more than the average U.S. wage.

With the support of much of Congress, President Bush entered a free trade agreement with Peru last month. Many Democrats, who are supported by labor leaders who traditionally oppose such agreements, threw their support to the plan.

The Peru trade accord has some notable conditions, including a requirement that the government provide protections for workers and the environment. Critics of past trade agreements, which lift duties on foreign imports, have charged that the agreements create unfair competition because U.S. trade partners don't have to comply with environmental and safety standards that American companies have to follow.

"These are new features," McKinley said of the environmental and labor requirements. "But the important point to underscore here is they may have been American demands

but they are also commitments which were taken on willingly by the governments in question. There is agreement on the importance of dealing with the problems."

Alachua County's Congressional representatives, including Corrine Brown, D-Jacksonville, and Cliff Stearns, R-Ocala, both voted in favor of the Peru plan. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Tallahassee, and Mel Martinez, R-Orlando, also got behind it.

None of the leading presidential candidates now serving in Congress voted on the Peru accord, but Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., all endorsed it, according to news reports. John Edwards, a former Democratic senator and presidential hopeful, was harshly critical of the plan.

"Like the failed free trade agreements before it, this agreement puts the interests of the big multi-national corporations first, ahead of the interests of American workers and communities," Edwards said in a prepared statement.

Florida is already benefiting from trade with Peru and the state stands to make significant gains under the agreement, McKinley said. Florida had \$658 million in total exports to Peru in 2006, up 66 percent from \$397 million in 2002, according to State Department figures.

A proposed trade agreement with Colombia is a worry for some because of the country's human rights abuses, including the killings of labor leaders.

McKinley acknowledges that Colombia has been described as a "failed state in the making," but argues that improvements have been made in cutting down drug trafficking and terrorism. According to a 2005 Central Intelligence Agency report, however, Colombia is the world's leading producer of cocaine and supplies most of the U.S. market for the drug.

"That's where much of the debate comes in, whether the Colombian government has done enough to merit support for a free trade agreement," McKinley said. "There can be honest differences on whether they do or not. Our belief is that enough has happened inside Colombia to merit support for the free trade agreement. No one is arguing that the situation has been resolved. What we are saying is we're in a much better place than we were before."

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