Apple farmers may benefit from trade deal

By ROB HOTAKAINEN
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WASHINGTON ◆ Ending a long stalemate, Congress passed three new trade agreements Wednesday evening, signing off on deals with South Korea, Colombia and Panama in an attempt to increase U.S. exports and create more jobs.

Among the potential winners: U.S. agricultural producers who grow cherries, potatoes and apples, big crops in Washington state and the Pacific Northwest.

Farmers expect sales to rise substantially when tariffs are lifted.

"There is no question that these agreements will increase jobs," Republican Rep. Doc Hastings of Washington state said in a speech on the House floor.

The pacts represent the nation's biggest trade deals since passage of the controversial North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994.

President Barack Obama, who had lobbied hard for the agreements, said the South Korean trade pact — the largest of the three — would create 70,000 new jobs in the United States.

Members of Congress were rushing to wrap up the deals before South Korean President Lee Myung-bak planned to go to the White House as part of an official state visit Thursday.

Hastings, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, said the agreement with South Korea would benefit Washington state potato growers and processors by immediately ending an 18 percent tariff they must pay when exporting their products.

Calling the trade agreements "critical to my constituents," Hastings predicted that apple growers would see a surge in their sales, as well.

"As our economy is struggling to recover, I encourage all of my colleagues to act now to support all of these three trade agreements — because all of these three agreements will expand an opportunity for our economy to grow, especially the agricultural and diverse agriculture economy I have in central Washington," Hastings said.

U.S. Rep. Chris Gibson, R-Kinderhook, said passing the three trade agreements is a good example bipartisan cooperation.

"It's clear that our producers, including our farmers but really wide-ranging across the economy, we stand to gain from these agreements, which really bring back fairness and balance into our trade agreements," he said.

Gibson said the agreements address trade inequities.

"You take a look at South Korea, right now our products generally have four times higher tariffs when we export in comparison to when we import," he said. "In Columbia's situation, over 98 percent of the goods that come from Columbia to the United States already are duty free.

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We have less than 40 percent that are duty free."

While the pacts divided many Democrats across the nation, they united most members of Congress from Washington State, where one of every three jobs is linked to international trade.

"If we're going to grow, we need access to other markets," said Democratic Rep. Adam Smith of Washington state, noting that 95 percent of the world's population lives outside of the United States.

Democratic Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, who referred to herself "as a senator from the most trade-dependent state in the nation," said the agreements would give the economy "a much-needed boost." She said it would help the state's aerospace and agricultural industries.

Even though she backed the agreements, Murray said Congress needs to do more to help U.S. workers who have been hurt by international trade. And she expressed concern about Colombia's "history of violence and intimidation against labor activists in their country."

Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell, a member of the Senate Finance Committee, which approved the trade pacts Tuesday, said the three trade deals would increase exports from Washington State by $52.8 million, citing Farm Bureau statistics.

"By passing this trade package, we're supporting jobs in Washington and across the nation — from the apple farm, to the trucks that carry the apples to the port, to the shipping jobs that send the product overseas," Cantwell said.

Post-Star staff writer Maury Thompson contributed to this report.