

# House OKs Central America trade pact

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The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House narrowly approved the Central American Free Trade Agreement early Thursday, a personal triumph for President Bush, who campaigned aggressively for the accord he said would foster prosperity and democracy in the hemisphere.

The 217-215 vote just after midnight adds six Latin American countries to the growing lists of nations with free trade agreements with the United States and averts what could have been a major political embarrassment for the Bush administration.

It was an uphill effort to win a

majority, with Bush traveling to Capitol Hill earlier in the day to appeal to wavering Republicans to support a deal he said was critical to U.S. national security.

Lobbying continued right up to the vote, with Vice President Dick Cheney, U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez tracking undecided lawmakers.

The United States signed the accord, known as CAFTA, a year ago with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, and the Senate approved it last month. It now goes to the president for his signature.

## On the Internet

■ Congress: <http://thomas.loc.gov/> The bill is H.R. 3045.

■ U.S. Trade Representative: [www.ustr.gov](http://www.ustr.gov)

To capture a majority, supporters had to overcome what some have called free trade fatigue, a growing sentiment that free trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada have contributed to a loss of well-paying American jobs and the soaring trade deficit.

Democrats, who were overwhelmingly against CAFTA, also argued that its labor rights provisions were weak and would result in exploitation of workers in Central America.

But supporters pointed out that CAFTA would over time eliminate tariffs and other trade barriers that impede U.S. sales to the region, correcting the current situation in which 80 percent of Central American goods enter the United States duty-free but Americans must pay heavy tariffs.

The agreement would also strengthen intellectual property protections and make it easier for Americans to invest in the region.

"As the Representative for one of the country's most agriculturally intense congressional districts, I am pleased to promote Colorado agriculture and join the Colorado Cattlemen Association, Colorado Wheat Growers, Colorado Corn Growers, Dairy Farmers of America, and Colorado Livestock Association and many others in support of CAFTA," said Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo.

"Farmers and ranchers in the Fourth District rank among the best in the world. Partnering with our neighbors in the hemisphere through this economic package secures our region's future in the global market," she said.