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Congress needs to get to work on free trade

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So far this year, Congress has passed 18 bills, 15 of which named a building after someone, temporarily extended expiring laws or appointed someone to a board. In spite of this "activity" and all the talk in Washington from both parties about "creating jobs," the national unemployment rate continues to rise, and remains at double digits here in Florida.

While Congress and other leaders wonder how to create jobs, they ignore a clear opportunity to do so by expanding markets for U.S. goods: the proposed free-trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea. Held hostage for years because of partisanship, these agreements are moving slowly through the legislative process, with congressional committees only recently approving the implementing bills.

While this is a monumental step in the right direction, leaders from both parties need to take this momentum onto the floor of Congress and pass these free-trade agreements. Gov. Rick Scott, Florida's Congressional delegation and all of our elected officials and our business community should aggressively lead the way in support of this job-creating effort for Florida.

Small businesses are the backbone of Florida's economy, and almost 96 percent of companies that export from Florida are small- and medium-sized businesses. Florida ranks as the fourth-largest state exporter of goods, and exports account for approximately 170,000 jobs in our state.

As one of the principal financial trading cities in the world, Miami does almost \$80 billion annually in trade with the world, \$60 billion with South and Central America and the Caribbean. Of our top 10 trade partners, eight are located in South America and the Caribbean.

Free-trade agreements bolster these numbers by allowing entrepreneurs and small businesses competitive and fair access to these markets. After passage of the free-trade agreement with Chile in 2004 for example, U.S. exports to Chile increased by 171 percent. Adding Colombia, Panama and South Korea to the list of free-trade partners will yield similar results by eliminating barriers to entry and difficulties that would otherwise prevent the sale of goods.

Between 2008 and 2010, Florida exported \$2.4 billion worth of goods to Colombia, more than \$1 billion to Panama and more than \$400 million to South Korea. Free-trade agreements would increase these figures exponentially. The Colombia trade agreement will eliminate tariffs and increase U.S. exports by more than \$1.1 billion, including fruits and vegetables where Florida ranks as a top-five exporter. With Panama, Floridians will benefit because agricultural, consumer and industrial products will gain immediate duty-free access not currently enjoyed. The effects of greater trade with South Korea would be similar where average tariffs of 54 percent on agricultural goods would be eliminated, increasing estimated U.S. exports by \$10 billion-\$11 billion, generating at least 70,000 jobs.

Passage of the free-trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea is a real and meaningful way to inject economic stimulus into the economies of the United States, Florida and Miami. Congress should therefore stop the infighting and get working on putting Americans back to work through free trade expansion.

Manny Diaz, a lawyer, is the former mayor of Miami.

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