

labor unions that it fails to protect the rights of low-paid workers in Central America who would be competing more directly with American workers. That means the deal needs almost unanimous support from Republicans. But a number of conservatives who have backed Bush on trade in the past are abandoning him on CAFTA because they hail from states where sugar beets and sugar cane are grown.

Nowhere is the White House's sugar problem more glaring than here in Idaho, where both senators and both House members -- GOP stalwarts all -- have declared themselves in the anti-CAFTA camp. The state's junior senator, Michael D. Crapo, sits on the Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over the accord, as do several other senators from nearby sugar beet-producing states, raising doubts about whether a majority vote in favor can be mustered on the normally pro-trade panel.

"The members of Idaho's congressional delegation deserve a thankful pat on the back" for their stance on CAFTA, wrote Ralph C. Burton, president of Amalgamated Sugar Co., a grower-owned cooperative, in the Idaho Statesman a few months ago. He cited a University of Idaho study estimating that sugar has created about 7,000 jobs in the state, which has a population of about 1.3 million.

More is at stake than CAFTA itself. Congress's failure to approve CAFTA could deal a major setback to bigger trade accords that Bush hopes to finalize in coming years, because it would arouse alarm overseas that the United States was turning protectionist and that the administration could not win congressional backing for the deals it strikes. Among the pacts potentially endangered by a CAFTA defeat is the World Trade Organization's Doha round, which is aimed at reducing tariffs and other impediments to commerce among the WTO's 148 member nations.

As a result, supporters of free-trade agreements are in a lather over the possibility that sugar, which accounts for less than 1 percent of all cropland harvested, might play such a critical role in trade policy.

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