

The Seattle Times

Editorial: Banning Mexican trucks harms Washington

3/23/2009

President Barack Obama has signed an omnibus spending bill that bans Mexican trucks from the United States. Mexico has retaliated by slapping punitive taxes on some of this state's products. The president needs to settle this dispute so that trade can flow and industry here does not needlessly suffer.

More than 15 years ago, the United States promised Mexico the right to pick up or deliver cross-border cargo anywhere in America by 2000. That was in the North American Free Trade Agreement — NAFTA. Mexico promised the same rights.

When the Clinton administration refused to follow through, Mexico claimed the United States had broken the agreement. Mexico took the matter to a NAFTA tribunal, which ruled in 2001 that Mexico was right.

The Bush administration said it accepted the ruling, but did so only partly. It authorized a handful of trucks to enter the United States in a pilot program. Now, as a result of Congress' action and the president's signature, even those trucks are excluded.

In retaliation, Mexico has slapped tariffs on a long list of U.S. goods, including 20-percent taxes on potatoes and pears. Packers in this state sold \$40.3 million in potatoes to Mexico last year, and \$33.5 million in pears.

"It's going to be easy for Canada to swoop in and take over that business," said Kathleen Connors, president of the Washington Council on International Trade.

The ostensible reason to block Mexican trucks is that they are unsafe. It is a false reason. Mexican trucks are the same sort as used in America. Many are Kenworths. The real reason is that some people benefit, or think they do, by having cargoes unnecessarily transferred from one country's trucks to the other's at the border.

Several years ago, when Barack Obama and Joseph Biden were senators from Illinois and Delaware, respectively, both voted to exclude Mexican trucks. The president and vice-president serve the nation now, and need to take a more statesmanlike view of its commercial interests.