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Editorial: Honor-bound on NAFTA trucks

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Fresh from confirmation as the U.S. trade representative, former Dallas Mayor Ron Kirk faces an unavoidable crisis with Mexico, America's No. 3 trading partner. But confront he must, because this problem has been allowed to fester far too long.

Mexico has justifiably lost patience after dawdling and delays by successive U.S. administrations on implementing NAFTA requirements granting Mexican trucks access to U.S. highways. The tipping point occurred last week when Congress canceled a pilot program allowing some Mexican trucks in.

The program's goal was to see whether Mexican companies could meet U.S. inspection and equipment standards. They surpassed the standards, which multiplies the unfairness of Congress' decision. Mexico retaliated yesterday by slapping tariffs of 10 percent to 45 percent on a \$2.4 billion list of 89 U.S. products.

This is serious. A trade war with Mexico is the last thing cash-strapped American employers need. Sales will drop, consumer prices will rise, and some companies might shut down when their export markets shrivel. That means more unemployment and a deepening economic crisis in the short term.

For the long term, Mexico's retaliatory action signals the unraveling of a longstanding trade partnership. For 15 years, the North American Free Trade Agreement has dismantled restrictions and tariffs that impeded the flow of goods and commerce between the United States, Canada and Mexico.

President Barack Obama, clearly no fan of NAFTA, should intervene immediately on the principle that America honors its treaty obligations. He should not only seek reinstatement of the pilot trucking program but enactment of rules that will allow qualified Mexican truckers to gain the full access that America was obligated under NAFTA to grant them after 1999.

U.S. truckers will trot out their tired old arguments that Mexican trucks are unsafe, pollution-belching death machines whose drivers are unqualified to sit behind the wheel. But federal statistics indicate that these arguments are hogwash. The real reason American truckers want to block this NAFTA provision is because they fear the competition.

Obama has every right to renegotiate NAFTA down the road. But for now, the treaty in hand is the one America is legally bound to honor.