

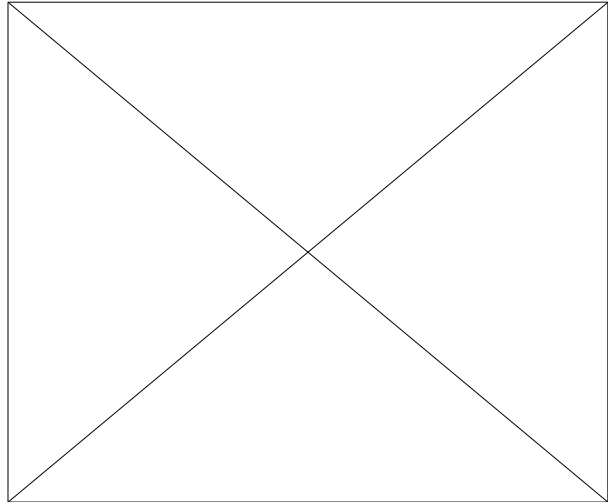
November 26, 2007

Colombia's success can mean larger market for Miss. products

By U.S. Rep. Roger F. Wicker
Special to The Clarion-Ledger

WASHINGTON — With Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez grabbing headlines for his anti-American rhetoric, the quiet but steady success story going on next door in Colombia has not received the attention it deserves.

I was part of a congressional delegation accompanying the U.S. trade representative and acting secretary of agriculture to Colombia recently to discuss its advances in democracy, anti-drug efforts, and new trade opportunities. Mississippi farmers, ranchers, and manufacturers could benefit from these developments.



Colombia is the second-most populous country in South America. It is a U.S. ally and an important trading partner, but the mention of Colombia might prompt many Americans to think of cocaine trafficking and lawlessness, not a strengthening democracy creating wide-ranging economic prospects for its people.

What we found on our trip were determined government leaders who are taking their country back from the drug lords who operated so freely there just a few years ago.

We visited with President Alvaro Uribe at the Presidential Palace in Bogota, the site of a brazen terrorist rocket attack on inauguration day in 2002. Today, Colombians walk through this peaceful plaza amid an atmosphere where new schools are being built, a beefed-up military has restored order, and economic opportunities offer alternatives to the illegal drug trade.

The city of Medellin was once ground zero for international drug cartel operations, and it had one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Violence there has been reduced to its lowest level in decades.

The government has captured or killed many senior cartel leaders and extradited 500 individuals to the U.S. to stand trial. Guerrilla groups have also been weakened by the Colombian military, and civil justice reforms have led to more human rights protections.

These changes have been produced with the help of U.S. aid under an initiative called Plan Colombia. President Uribe thanked our delegation for the bipartisan U.S. support that has made this strategy possible. It includes funding for drug eradication efforts, military training, human rights programs, and economic measures to encourage investment and job creation.

Colombia is our fifth largest trading partner in South America and the largest importer of U.S. agricultural products. In 2006, 92 percent of imports from Colombia entered the U.S. duty-free, while tariffs were imposed on virtually all American goods going into their country.

A pending trade agreement in Congress would eliminate those tariffs and create a larger market for, among other things, agricultural products and manufactured goods from Mississippi.

The Mississippi Farm Bureau is among many U.S. agricultural and business groups backing the trade deal because of its potential to boost exports of beef, cotton, soybeans, rice, and other key commodities. In return, the pact will enable Colombia to enhance its ability to compete in the global marketplace.

Colombia's continued economic success will provide more momentum to improve the quality of life for its people and fight drug trafficking.

While much work remains to be done on the drug front, progress has been made in reducing cocaine production, and less of the drug is coming into the U.S. from Colombia.

A strong democracy in the region would also provide a counterweight to the influence and unpredictable activities of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

U.S. Rep. Roger F. Wicker represents the 1st Congressional District in Mississippi.