



Oppose the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement

March 12, 2008

Dear Representative,

On behalf of our more than one million members and supporters we urge you to oppose consideration of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Given the ongoing environmental degradation and egregious human rights abuses in Colombia, including extreme anti-union violence, it is inappropriate to contemplate a trade agreement with Colombia at this time.

Our organizations continue to support well-crafted trade policies that protect the environment and workers, enhance public health and safety, foster strong democratic institutions and raise the standard of living worldwide. Despite the inclusion of some essential environmental and labor safeguards, the Colombia Free Trade Agreement none-the-less adheres to the same failed NAFTA/CAFTA model which encourages industry to relocate in pursuit of the least stringent environmental and social standards.

Workers rights, human rights and environmental rights are inextricably linked. For example, Colombia's flower industry, which provides the U.S. with more than 60% of its flowers, is fraught with environmental and worker-rights violations. Workers are routinely exposed to pesticides and fertilizers while laboring more than 12 hours a day. Efforts to advocate for better working conditions are often met with docked pay, firings or even violence and yet, a free trade agreement would undoubtedly increase the U.S. market for this industry.

Similarly, the rapid expansion of Colombia's palm oil production is creating both environmental harm and human rights abuse. Already, the land area devoted to oil palm plantations in Colombia has nearly doubled from 145,027 hectares in 1998 to 275,317 hectares in 2005, causing large scale deforestation and an increase in global warming pollution. Reports of forced and sometimes violent displacement linked to the expansion of palm oil plantations suggest serious human rights violations and illegal land acquisition.

In Colombia as a whole, more than 3,000 union leaders, activists and members have been murdered since 1985, according to an annual survey of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. For this reason, we stand in solidarity with organized labor in opposing this FTA.

Finally, the Andean region, including Colombia, is a vast reservoir of biodiversity and cultural distinctiveness. For example, the Chocó region (an area of 75,000 km² on the Colombian Pacific coast) shows the greatest concentration of biodiversity in the world with regard to the number of species per hectare. Unfortunately, these precious resources face serious threats in the form of the current free trade model.

Trade agreements should support, rather than undermine, environmental protection, human rights and labor standards. Passage of a trade agreement with Colombia, at this time, would lend credence to a system that routinely violates human rights. For this reason, we urge you to oppose this agreement or any other agreement negotiated with a country that fails to observe international labor or environmental rights.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carl Pope', written in a cursive style.

Carl Pope
Executive Director, Sierra Club

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brent Blackwelder', written in a cursive style.

Brent Blackwelder,
President, Friends of the Earth