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A pep rally, then scrimmages

AT AMERICAS BUSINESS FORUM, AGREEMENT ON ACCESS, ANTAGONISM ON AGRICULTURE
by Peter Zalewski

Business community demands for more say in how the Free Trade Area of the Americas is to be shaped apparently are being heard — to a limited extent — by negotiators.

For the first time since the FTAA process started in 1994, participants in the two-day Americas Business Forum leading up to a 34-nation ministerial meeting were told Monday that they would be able to voice their opinions directly to committee heads responsible for drafting the proposed trade treaty.

Previously, business leaders could express their opinions only through position papers that were to be forwarded to negotiators at the forum's conclusion.

"We are trying to have this be the most serious effort that the ABF has done so far to produce very pointed, very useful, very specifically drafted recommendations instead of simply generalizing about what one or another sector of the business community might want or might not want," said Carl Cira, a forum organizer.

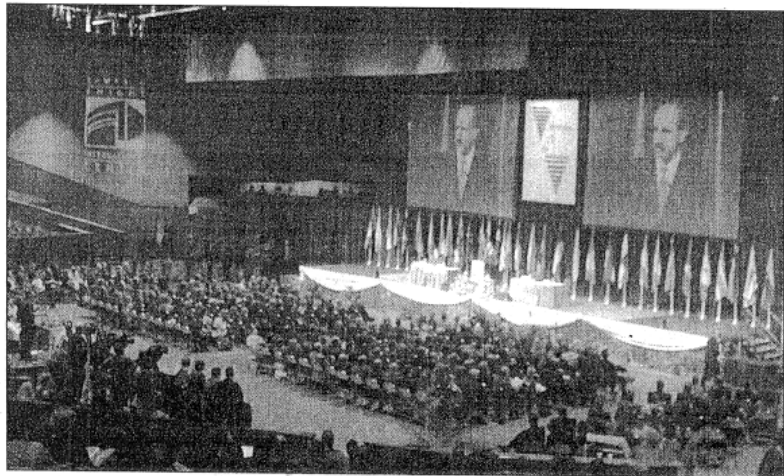
Cira, executive director of the Summit of the Americas Center at Florida International University, announced the unprecedented access during the ABF opening ceremony at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Miami.

The meetings were launched Monday after upbeat speeches by FTAA Ministerial and Americas Business Forum executive director Luis Lauredo, Gov. Jeb Bush, Florida FTAA chairman Chuck Cobb and Miami Mayor Manny Diaz.

The meetings began immediately after the pep rally; some were nowhere near as friendly.

Agriculture, the most anticipated workshop because of an ensuing face-off between the United States and Brazil that threatens to stall the FTAA, got off to a slow start. About 30 people crammed into a small conference center to bicker about tariffs and which products should be excluded from an agreement.

Several South American business leaders — about 95 percent of the audience — argued for free access to the U.S. agriculture market, according to an academic who asked not to be identified. The participants, according to



The Americas Business Forum opened Monday at Miami's Hyatt Regency Hotel with speeches from FTAA boosters.

this witness, got stuck on which products should be excluded and how to apply exclusions to countries of different levels of economic development.

"We will make progress in certain areas, but we are not going to reach consensus on everything," the source said. "That's a given. There are going to be areas of contention that will have to be solved outside of this area. That is why we have top negotiators."

Workshop participants in the investment and market access sessions accomplished much more.

The investment workshop appeared to reach consensus on leaving so-called "performance requirements" to be debated in the context of the World Trade Organization level instead of the FTAA. The requirements are ways for foreign countries to generate local jobs by forcing investors to purchase some materials locally. The United States opposes the practice.

"This performance requirement has been a sticking point," said David Wernick, vice rapporteur for the investment workshop.

The market access workshop also made progress, despite a lively debate among 400 people. Participants agreed on several points, including tariff elimination, the level of duty reductions, the handling of remanufactured merchandise and the exemptions allowed in foreign trade zones.

"We were able to reach a consensus, we grabbed it and moved on," said

Lenny Feldman, the vice rapporteur of the market access workshop.

The ABF participants were excited by the opportunity to have more of an impact in the discussions.

"The more interaction the industry can have with the actual negotiating parties is a positive. It puts more relevance onto what we are doing here," Feldman said. "This is a first time for the ABF."

Representatives of Florida's sugar and citrus industries, which oppose the FTAA, said they were looking forward to the exchange.

"There may be a script all done in a desk somewhere for all I know," said Robert Coker, spokesman for U.S. Sugar. "But there is at least a sense here that you have the opportunity to provide input. That's why a lot of us came down."

The heads of the FTAA trade negotiating committees plan to visit the parallel ABF workshops for question and answer sessions. The 30-minute sessions are planned for some time this morning.

"Some of it is P.R., but we are hoping that some of these people will be willing to say, 'We have some tough issues that are this, that and the next thing,'" Cira said. "A lot of people in this group here know very well what the issues are." ♦

Peter Zalewski can be reached at pzalewski@floridabiz.com or at (305) 347-6645.