FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 12, 2011

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Floor Statement of Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
Regarding the Colombia, Panama and South Korea Free Trade Agreements
As prepared for delivery

The English poet Thomas Gray once said, "Commerce changes the fate and genius of nations."

The United States has always understood that commerce with foreign nations improves our fate and sharpens our genius. We know that opening the channels of commerce creates new opportunities, generates new ideas and forms new partnerships. We know that engaging in global commerce makes us more competitive, more innovative and more productive.

Today, the Senate has a historic opportunity to build on this legacy by approving our free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea. These agreements will increase exports of U.S. goods and services, they will create tens of thousands of good-paying American jobs, and they will bind us even more closely to three important allies.

Colombia has returned from the brink of becoming a failed state to being the third largest economy in Latin America and one of its most respected leaders. Considering the state it was in 15 years ago, it's amazing how far Colombia has come. Panama is the crossroads of global commerce and among the fastest-growing economies in the Western Hemisphere. And South Korea is the world's 15th largest economy, our seventh-largest trading partner, and a strategic ally in a volatile region.

Now more than ever, we need to expand commerce and improve our economic fate. Our economy is growing too slowly. Consumer demand is too weak. American workers, farmers and ranchers are desperately seeking new markets and new customers for their products.

The Colombia, Panama and South Korea trade agreements will help U.S. exporters gain new customers in three lucrative and fast-growing markets. They will increase U.S. exports by up to $13 billion each year. They will boost our GDP by more than $15 billion. And they will support tens of thousands of urgently-needed American jobs.

These agreements will help folks like Errol Rice, a fifth-generation cattle rancher from Helena, Montana.

Earlier this year, Errol testified before the Finance Committee on the importance of the South Korea trade agreement. He told us that South Korea is the fourth-largest market in the world for U.S. beef and growing rapidly.

Errol welcomed the commitments I secured to increase funding for market promotion and fully implement our bilateral beef import protocol, but he underscored that our position in the South Korean market is at risk. Australia, a large beef exporter, is racing to conclude its own trade agreement with South Korea. By approving our agreement with South Korea today, we will help Errol and all American ranchers maintain their competitive edge, increase sales and create jobs in their communities.

Trade agreements improve our economy only if they create a level playing field for U.S. exporters. We cannot allow our trading partners to gain an unfair advantage by failing to respect worker rights or protect the environment.

That's why the Colombia, Panama and South Korea trade agreements include robust labor and environment commitments. These commitments require our trading partners to uphold internationally-recognized labor rights, including the right to organize and bargain collectively. They also require our partners to protect the environment. These important obligations are fully enforceable, just like the commercial obligations in the agreements.

In many cases, our FTA partners have gone the extra mile to meet our high standards. Colombia is the best example. Many of us are concerned about the history of violence against labor union members in Colombia. We believe that the death of even one union member is one too many.

But I would urge my colleagues to consider the progress that Colombia has made in recent years and the commitment of the Colombian government to continue that progress. This commitment is demonstrated by the Labor Action Plan, which President Obama and Colombian President Santos agreed to in April.

In the Action Plan, Colombia made specific and groundbreaking commitments to strengthen worker rights, protect workers from violence and prosecute the perpetrators of violence. Colombia has fulfilled every single commitment to date. It has hired 100 new inspectors to enforce worker rights. It has cracked down on the abuse of cooperatives. It has expanded a union member protection program. And it has sentenced to prison 47 people found guilty of killing union members. There is still more to be done, but Colombia has demonstrated remarkable progress.

By approving the free trade agreement, we will have a mechanism to enforce all fundamental labor rights in Colombia, including the rights addressed by the Action Plan. If we reject the agreement, we lose the ability to ensure labor conditions in Colombia improve.

The trade agreements we are considering today will also help us rise to the challenge of China. Today, China is the largest trading partner for South Korea and the second largest partner for Colombia and Panama.

If we approve these agreements, we will give American exporters a leg up on their competitors from China and other countries. If we reject them, China's advantage and influence in these markets will only grow.

Finally, we should begin thinking about the next steps for our trade agenda. Once these agreements are approved, we should invite our new FTA partners to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, negotiations. We need to extend these negotiations to create even more jobs in America.

Colombia, Panama and South Korea have clearly demonstrated their ability to make the far-reaching commitments that our trade agreements require. Their participation in the TPP negotiations would help us achieve a high-standard, 21st century agreement that spans the Pacific.

Thomas Gray was correct when he said that commerce changes the fate and genius of nations. And there is no better example than the United States. We have benefited greatly from trading with foreign nations.

In these tough economic times, we need to embrace those benefits now more than ever. For the sake of American exporters seeking to grow and create jobs, let us approve our free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea.

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