

## Trump administration makes major push for Congress to pass new NAFTA

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Politico.com 05/30/2019 04:32 PM EDT



Democrats in Congress have warned the Trump administration that they remain concerned with a number of aspects of the North American trade agreement. | Win McNamee/Getty Images

The Trump administration has taken a step toward ratification of the new North American trade agreement, sending a draft statement to Congress that puts the legislative body on notice the pact could be coming soon.

The decision to send the draft of what's called the "Statement of Administrative Action" on Thursday afternoon is creating fresh tension with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democrats who are still pressing the administration to address problems that they have raised with the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

The step comes after U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and other Trump administration officials emphasized that they would not send the USMCA to Congress without a signal from Pelosi that she and her caucus were ready to hold a vote on it.

The move begins a 30-day window that must pass before the Trump administration is allowed to submit the full implementing legislation to Congress. It does not start a clock on any legislation to be taken up, but it paves the way for the next step in the process — sending the USMCA to Capitol Hill for a vote — to take place as soon as the end of next month.

But Democrats are continuing to press for changes in areas such as labor standards and enforcement. Pelosi has also [indicated](#) that she wants to see how Mexico implements its new labor laws before USMCA gets a vote in Congress.

The House speaker derided the decision to send the draft statement before Democrats were fully satisfied as "not a positive step."

"It indicates a lack of knowledge on the part of the administration on the policy and process to pass a trade agreement," she said in a lengthy statement. "A new trade agreement without enforcement is not progress for the American worker, just a press release for the president."

House Ways and Means Chairman Richard Neal (D-Mass.) also said that the timeline for considering the deal will depend on when changes are made to address Democrats' issues with the agreement. The "premature submission" of the draft statement will have "no impact" on continuing discussions, Neal added.

A Capitol Hill aide added that the draft statement was unlikely to bring the Trump administration "any closer to addressing concerns that members of Congress have voiced."

"I think they're trying to create the illusion of progress by checking a box," the aide said.

Administration officials, for their part, sought to emphasize that the decision to move forward with the statement of administrative action was foremost a procedural step.

In a letter sent to key congressional leaders including Pelosi, Lighthizer said the draft statement "provides an outline for further discussions with Congress on these issues."

"We believe that the USMCA can — and ultimately will — attract broad bipartisan support in both Houses of Congress," Lighthizer wrote. "That certainly remains my goal."

The timing of the move leaves open the possibility of the Trump administration seeing the deal passed this summer, depending on whether and when officials are able to reach a compromise with Democrats.

Vice President Mike Pence told reporters earlier Thursday during a trip to Ottawa that the administration is "working earnestly" to wrap the process up before the fall.

"I can assure you that the president and I are working with members of the United States Congress to pass the USMCA — and to pass the USMCA this summer," Pence said during a news conference after a meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The White House's move also backs up actions that its North American trading partners have taken this week to move the deal toward approval in their respective countries. Mexico took the first steps to ratify the new North American pact in its Senate on Thursday, while Canada introduced a bill earlier this week to implement the deal.

Although the move represents the most significant step so far toward ratification in the U.S., it does not guarantee the trade deal will be voted on anytime soon.

Former President Barack Obama, for example, submitted his statement of administrative action for the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership in August 2016, but he never ultimately sent the implementing bill for the deal.

That's partly because Republican leaders refused to move on the legislation in the heat of the 2016 presidential election, and partly because even members of Congress who supported the TPP had a number of concerns about various provisions in the agreement.

*Doug Palmer and Sabrina Rodriguez contributed to this report.*

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