

U.S. says Mexico truck program on track

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MEXICO CITY --

A pilot program to allow Mexican trucks into all areas of the United States should be in place by July, a top U.S. trade official said Tuesday.

Access to the U.S. by Mexican trucks has been delayed for years by safety and environmental concerns and resistance from U.S. truckers.

"To my mind Mexico has lived up to its responsibility" in addressing safety concerns raised by the U.S. Congress, said Franklin L. Lavin, undersecretary for international trade for the U.S. "We fully intend to go ahead with liberalization in July. So we're on track."

Lavin spoke to U.S. business leaders at a luncheon sponsored by the American Chamber of Commerce in Mexico City.

The administration of U.S. President George W. Bush has announced a one-year pilot program for Mexican trucks to enter the U.S. But an April launch was delayed for additional public comment under pressure from the U.S. Congress.

A lawsuit was filed in a federal court last month to block the project by the Teamsters Union, The Sierra Club, Public Citizen and the Environmental Law Foundation, citing safety and environmental concerns. Of major concern is whether Mexican trucks, often older than U.S. cargo vehicles, will be able to meet rigorous U.S. safety standards.

"Some in the U.S. have legitimate concerns and others are coming from a more nationalistic bent," Lavin told journalists after the luncheon.

In other matters, Lavin said Mexico's high crime rates may have an impact on U.S. investment "on the margins," but said that it should be far outweighed by the "positive news," including Mexico's continued economic growth and acceptance of U.S. products.

"I'm pretty optimistic about continued U.S. corporate participation in the Mexican economy," he said.

Lavin said Mexico needs to do more to break up the business monopolies that are stemming competition and further growth, particularly in the telecommunications sector.

"To be competitive Mexico needs to end monopolies and open up these markets," he said.