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Trade Clampdown Effort Draws Kudos From Steel Industry

Posted on 12 August 2010 by Ellen. Tags: [China](#), [countervailing duties](#), [jobs](#), [steel](#), [Trade](#)

*The following article appeared in **American Metal Market** on August 6, 2010.*

PITTSBURGH — Eleven U.S. senators are looking to expand the powers of the U.S. Commerce Department in areas such as anti-dumping and countervailing duty investigations, drawing kudos from steel industry players.

Sens. Ron Wyden (D., Ore.) and Olympia Snowe (R., Maine) introduced what is being called the Enforcing Orders and Reducing Circumvention and Evasion Act, or the Enforce Act, which would give Commerce the tools necessary to prevent foreign countries from evading U.S. trade laws.

The legislation points out that exporters from developing countries-in particular China-have been known to mislabel shipments and re-route goods through third-party countries in an attempt to fool customs officials and circumvent U.S. trade laws designed to promote free and fair trade. The senators say the surging amount of imports from these countries is making it more difficult for U.S. Customs officials to identify cheaters and enforce laws.

The new legislation provides them stronger and more effective tools to do so. The Washington-based Committee on Pipe and Tube Imports (CPTI) and its Customs Task Force were among the first to applaud the measure.

“A lot of us in the manufacturing sector and especially those of us in the steel pipe and tube industry recognize that there is a serious problem with customs fraud and duty evasion,” Dave Seeger, CPTI’s chairman and president of John Maneely Co., said. John Maneely includes under its umbrella tube makers Atlas Tube Inc. and Wheatland Tube Co.

“The introduction of the Enforce Act of 2010 is an important first step and sends a strong message that the Congress is committed to enforcement of the trade laws. We applaud Senator Wyden and Senator Snowe on their leadership and look forward to working with them to enact this legislation,” he said.

The senators, along with nine other Senate supporters, sent a letter to the White House urging the Obama administration to do more to combat unfair trade practices. In it, they once again called on Obama to address China's alleged practice of currency manipulation along with other illegal trade practices.

Wyden, who chairs the International Trade Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Finance, said the Enforce Act would dramatically improve enforcement of U.S. trade laws.

“If the government is serious about helping American businesses grow and create jobs, it must ensure that U.S. trade laws are enforced and duties are paid,” he said in a statement. “The Enforce Act is going to unleash the resources of the U.S. Department of Commerce to investigate evasion of U.S. trade laws and ensure that the correct trade remedy duties are applied at the border.”

The Enforce Act is designed to combat the evasion of anti-dumping and countervailing duty orders and enforce trade remedy statutes that are already on the books. It would do so by empowering Commerce to investigate evasion of trade remedy laws, establishing a rapid-response timeline by which Commerce and the U.S. Customs Department would respond to allegations of evasion, and improving the safety of imports.

Thomas J. Gibson, president and chief executive officer of the American Iron and Steel Institute, Washington, also applauded the legislation.

“American manufacturers have been continually put at a severe disadvantage due to unfair trade policies practiced abroad,” he said. “The Commerce Department has already missed two critical opportunities this year to cite China as a currency manipulator. If we want to reach the President’s goal of doubling exports in the next five years, we must enforce the rules that already are in place now and adopt stronger policies that will level the international playing field and help restore good-paying American manufacturing jobs.”

In addition to Wyden and Snowe, Senate supporters who signed the letter to the White House include Sherrod Brown (D., Ohio), Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.), Debbie Stabenow (D., Mich.), Jim Bunning (R., Ky.), Arlen Specter (D., Pa.), Susan Collins (R., Maine), Ben Cardin (D., Md.), Bob Casey (D., Pa.), and Carl Levin (D., Mich.).

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