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Teamsters Sue Over Mexican-Truck Plan

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By Melanie Trottman

WASHINGTON—The Teamsters union filed a lawsuit against the Obama administration on Friday seeking to block the government's plan to allow Mexican trucks back into the U.S., in a sign of the growing rift between unions and the administration over trade.

The suit challenges a deal the U.S. signed with Mexico in July to resolve a longstanding dispute over cross-border trucking. The agreement ended a two-decade-long ban on Mexican trucks entering the U.S.

The North American Free Trade Agreement, signed in 1994, called for allowing Mexican truckers into the U.S., but the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and Democratic allies in Congress repeatedly used legislation to block access. Nafta ruled in the late 1990s that Mexico could impose punitive tariffs, which it did in 2009, affecting \$2.4 billion in U.S. goods annually.

Earlier this year, President Barack Obama and Mexican President Felipe Calderon jointly unveiled their plan to resolve the dispute, including a reciprocal pilot program that would allow Mexican trucks into the U.S. under certain rules.

The suit was filed Friday in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco by the Teamsters and the nonprofit group Public Citizen against the Department of Transportation and its Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. The complaint alleges that the pilot program sets standards that aren't stringent enough for Mexican trucks and drivers. For example, the program waives a law requiring trucks to display proof of meeting federal safety standards, said Jonathan Weissglass, a lawyer for the plaintiffs.

An official for the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration said the Teamsters haven't directly served the agency with a lawsuit. Once they do, the agency "will review and address the filing," she said, adding that the pilot program will begin within 30 to 60 days. The official declined to address the substance of the suit.

U.S. officials have said the deal would hold Mexican truckers to high safety standards, and business groups have said it is important to make a deal with Mexico because the retaliatory tariffs are costing the U.S. jobs.

The Obama administration has also clashed with some of its labor supporters over proposed free-trade deals with South Korea, Colombia and Panama.

The Teamsters allege the trucker program is faulty because it contains certain standards that are impossible for Mexico to meet. Mexico won't be able to provide comparable access to U.S. trucks, as required, because ultra-low-sulfur diesel fuel isn't widely enough available there, the lawsuit alleges.

Mr. Weissglass, a partner at San Francisco law firm Altshuler Berzon LLP, said this fuel is required for trucks in the U.S. to achieve better engine efficiency and emissions controls. Shifting to another fuel after using this one could cause engine damage and violate truck-manufacturer warranties, he said.

The Teamsters also said Mexican truckers have less-stringent vision requirements than truckers in the U.S., which will allegedly violate the pilot program's requirement for equivalent trucker safety in the two countries.

Teamsters President Jim Hoffa likened the pilot program to allowing guest workers into the country at a time of high U.S. unemployment.

"The last thing America needs right now is a guest worker program on wheels. We created zero jobs last month," he said, referring to the U.S. unemployment report issued Friday.