

UNITED STATES SENATOR • IOWA
CHUCK GRASSLEY
RANKING MEMBER • SENATE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

<http://grassley.senate.gov>
press_office@grassley.senate.gov

Contact: Jill Kozeny, 202/224-1308
Jill Gerber, 202/224-6522

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Grassley Urges Improvement of Trade Advisory System

WASHINGTON – Sen. Chuck Grassley, ranking member of the Committee on Finance, today encouraged United States Trade Representative Robert Zoellick to continue implementing the recommendations of a new report showing the nation’s trade advisory system needs improvement.

“This report is extremely important and timely,” Grassley said. “It’s been decades since there has been a comprehensive review of our trade advisory system. With the passage of Trade Promotion Authority, our trade negotiators are embarking on a number of new bilateral and multilateral trade negotiations. We need to make sure our nation has the best trade advisory system possible to meet the needs of our negotiators, the Congress and the U.S. economy.

“The General Accounting Office report reinforces the positive impact that the trade advisory system has on our trade negotiations. But the report also shows the system could use improvement. I know Ambassador Zoellick is already taking steps to improve our trade advisory system, and I appreciate his efforts. It’s common sense to make sure business and agricultural groups have a say in how trade policy will affect their ability to keep jobs, create jobs and otherwise contribute to the economy. This helps ensure that trade negotiators and members of Congress are fully informed about the implications of our actions.”

Grassley’s comments came after the completion of a review he requested of the trade advisory system by the General Accounting Office (GAO). The GAO’s report, “International Trade/Advisory Committee System Should Be Updated to Better Serve U.S. Policy Needs,” GAO-02-876, will be available soon at www.gao.gov.

Grassley wrote a letter to Zoellick to encourage the continued implementation of the GAO’s recommendations. The text of Grassley’s letter follows.

October 22, 2002

The Honorable Robert B. Zoellick
United States Trade Representative
600 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20508

Dear Ambassador Zoellick:

As you know, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) recently reviewed, at my request, the role, structure, and operations of the 28-year-old trade advisory committee system. I asked GAO to perform this review because I believe that it is essential for our international trade negotiators to have access to the most comprehensive and effective trade advisory system possible.

The published report, "Advisory Committee System Should be Updated to Better Serve U.S. Policy Needs" (September 2001; GAO-02-876), reinforced the positive impact which the trade advisory committee system has on our international trade negotiations. However, in its report GAO also identified a number of concerns with the current system. In specific, the GAO noted that "lack of policy direction and poor system administration at executive branch agencies are weakening the advisory committee system's capacity to accomplish its statutory mission. USTR, as the lead agency, has not provided clear policy direction." GAO also found that, "mismatches between the advisory committee system and the U.S. economy and trade policy issues suggest that the system neither provides the executive branch with all the advice it needs nor assures Congress that negotiated agreements are fully in U.S. interests."

GAO also made specific recommendations about how to improve and strengthen the system. I understand from your written comments in response to the report that your office is taking steps to implement some of GAO's recommendations. Specifically, USTR stated that it is working on implementing the four following GAO recommendations to:

- clarify procedures for consulting with trade advisory committees,
- seek qualified candidates to serve on committees,
- streamline the security clearance process for advisory committee nominees, and
- improve consultation procedures so advisory committee members have timely access to relevant documents.

I believe these are important steps that will make the consultation process more relevant and meaningful and I would be interested to learn the results of your efforts. Therefore, please advise me at the earliest possible date, but no later than January 15, 2003, of the specific steps USTR is taking to implement these recommendations.

In addition, GAO recommended that USTR undertake, in concert with the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, and the EPA Administrator, an assessment of the entire trade advisory system, and update it to make it more relevant to the current U.S. economy and trade policy demands.

In my view, this is also a important recommendation that addresses many of the concerns raised in the GAO report. Because I am considering introducing legislation in the 108th Congress to implement some of GAO's recommendations and to enhance the current trade advisory system, I would appreciate knowing your timetable for implementing this recommendation at the earliest possible date, but not later than January 15, 2003.

Your efforts to implement the GAO recommendations, and update and streamline the trade advisory committee system, will help ensure that the advisory committee system can meet the objectives set for it by Congress. They will also enhance the prospects that your work at the negotiating table will result in international trade agreements that Congress can approve with confidence.

I appreciate your consideration of my views and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Charles E. Grassley

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