

Teamsters air campaign against Mexican trucks

by Paul M. Krawzak

WASHINGTON - The Teamsters have launched a blistering radio and direct-mail campaign calling for the firing of U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, who they blame for continuing a program that allows Mexican trucks to travel throughout the United States.

The campaign marks the latest effort to end the controversial, five-month-old, cross-border trucking project promoted by the Bush administration.

In the radio ad, which will start running Thursday on the self-described "progressive" Air America radio network, the blaring of a horn and sound of a crash precede a call to "fire" Peters. The ad proclaims that Peters has ignored a law passed last year to end the program. The ad is expected to run one week.

Teamster leadership said it is firing off 250,000 letters to union members who live along the U.S.-Mexican border or haul freight to generate opposition to the program.

The union also is targeting Peters in her home state of Arizona, where the transportation chief has been mentioned as a possible gubernatorial candidate in 2010.

"Part of what we want to do is make it clear that there is a political price for doing this," said Teamsters spokeswoman Leslie Miller.

Brian Turmail, a Department of Transportation spokesman, was dismissive of the attack.

"It's the kind of thing you do when the facts aren't on your side," he said. "Considering the source, it's pretty ironic."

The administration refused to end the program after Congress passed a law to deny it funding. Officials claimed that a loophole in the law allows existing programs to continue.

Opponents have filed suit to stop the program in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, where oral arguments are scheduled next Tuesday.

Several lawmakers who oppose the program looked into the possibility of a congressional lawsuit against the executive branch, but they were advised by attorneys it was unlikely to succeed, they said.

Opponents of the program charge the administration has failed to ensure that Mexican drivers meet the same safety standards as Americans, creating a danger on U.S. highways.

U.S. officials counter that every Mexican driver must pass a safety audit before joining the pilot program. The administration views the pilot as the first step toward a wider opening of the border to trucks from both nations, a move it says would benefit both nations' economies.

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