

# Though no longer on the payroll, retirees remain active in Oregon alliance

Alliance for Retired Americans opposes TPP free trade deal, says it will impact prescription medicine costs

By Michael Gutwig  
Editor & Manager

Passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement would be bad news for seniors who buy prescription medicines, says Richard Fiesta, executive director of the Alliance for Retired Americans (ARA), an allied group of the AFL-CIO.

Fiesta was a keynote speaker at the annual convention of the Oregon chapter of the ARA, held March 14 in Portland. More than 75 people attended.

TPP is a trade agreement currently under secret negotiation by the United States, Canada and 10 other Pacific Rim nations. President Barack Obama and some members of Congress want to “fast track” the trade deal. Under fast track (also known as trade promotion authority), Congress must hold an up-or-down vote within 90 days of when the agreement is presented. The rules also limit debate and prohibit any amendments.

The AFL-CIO and all of organized labor opposes the deal, calling it a “job killer” that creates an unfair playing field for workers in the U.S., especially

those in manufacturing.

Focusing on retirees, Fiesta said leaked text from the TPP negotiations indicates that pharmaceutical companies would have the ability to sue federal and state governments over drug pricing policies that are designed to keep health care costs down. Taxpayer-funded programs such as Medicaid and some veterans’ and military health programs have the ability to mandate cost reductions and negotiate lower medicine prices.

“It would make it a trade violation, and allow pharmaceutical companies to sue governments in special international tribunals that are packed with business types,” Fiesta said.

According to leaked language from the negotiations, he said the TPP could further drive up costs for retirees by extending patent protections on drugs, thus making it harder for companies to produce cheaper, generic versions.

“Americans already pay the highest prescription drug prices in the world,” Fiesta said. “Seniors have a huge stake in this trade deal.”

Seniors make up 13 percent of the U.S. population — 1 out of 8 people are over age 65. This segment of the population is responsible for roughly 45 percent of all the money spent on prescription medicines.

Fiesta said Oregon’s Con-



Richard Fiesta (at podium), executive director of the Alliance for Retired Americans, speaks at annual convention of the Oregon chapter of ARA.

gressional delegation will play a critical role in the outcome of the TPP, starting with Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR).

Wyden, who has supported most trade deals since NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), is the ranking Democrat on the Republican-controlled Senate Finance Committee. Republicans (and Obama) need Wyden’s help getting Democratic support in order to move fast track — and avoid a filibuster. He’s been negotiating with committee chair Orin Hatch (R-Utah) to find a way to deliver the legislation.

Hatch reportedly wants to introduce fast track legislation later this month, after lawmakers return from Easter break.

Fiesta encouraged retirees to “really encourage Wyden to op-

pose fast track,” Fiesta said. “Go meet, go write, go stomp, go parade, go demonstrate, and go do it early and often and soon.

“Sen. Wyden started out with the Gray Panthers. We need to get him back to his roots,” Fiesta said.

— Richard Fiesta  
Executive Director  
Alliance for Retired Americans

Another conference speaker, Chuck Sheketoff, executive director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy, told retirees that Oregon’s overall tax system is better than most states. “But, like most states, our tax system is a bit upside down. The wealthiest Oregonians pay a smaller share of their income in state and local taxes than the lowest income earners. And that’s not right.”

Sheketoff said 393 Oregon corporations — including 169 profitable ones — paid zero corporate taxes in Oregon. At least 49 corporations that paid zero had over \$1 million in profits allocated in Oregon.

If today’s corporate tax rate of 6-7 percent was at the same level it was in the mid-1970s (18 percent), Sheketoff said, Oregon would have an extra \$2 billion

in the state budget without affecting anyone else’s taxes.

In convention business, delegates re-elected officers and passed a handful of resolutions. OARA officers are: Scott Blau, president; Linda Delucia, vice president; Leanna Hakala, secretary; Geri Nelson, treasurer; and Ron Rogers and Jane Netboy, trustees. The position of second vice president is vacant.

The alliance passed resolutions supporting an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 an hour; they called on Congress to reauthorize the Older Americans Act; and delegates supported a state-sponsored retirement program as outlined in Oregon Senate Bill 615 and House Bill 2960.

Delegates also approved reorganizing from a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization to a 501(c)(4) social welfare group, under the name Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans Education Fund. The change will allow the retirees group to be more politically active.

The Oregon ARA dedicated its luncheon to Gretchen Kafoury, who died March 13. The former Multnomah County commissioner, Portland city commissioner and state representative was tireless in her support for affordable housing and equality for women.

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## No Fast Track rally April 18

The Oregon AFL-CIO is sponsoring a statewide day of action April 18 against the Fast Track, against the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and for fair trade. Marches and rallies will be held in Portland, Eugene, Bend, and Medford.

Details are still in the works. For the latest information, go on line at [www.oraflcio.org/tpp](http://www.oraflcio.org/tpp).