

Canada/EU free trade talks proceeding slowly

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Union's ambassador to Canada says even though it's "crunch time" for free trade talks with Europe, the most contentious issues have yet to be resolved after three years of negotiations.

Matthias Brinkmann, head of the European Union Delegation to Canada, said Monday the talks could drag into next year, blowing a year-end deadline that Ottawa had planned for.

"Now we're in the final stretch and it's crunch time ... the most difficult issues, we always keep them until the end," he said. "The ambition is there to wrap this up by the end of this year or early next year."

Discussions ongoing

Brinkmann — in Halifax to meet with Premier Darrell Dexter and other officials — said talks in Brussels have yet to tackle several thorny issues, including patent protection for pharmaceuticals.

Negotiators are also still grappling with procurement rules for public projects, market access for agricultural products, rules of origin and investment protection.

The Conservative government has indicated it wants to close a Canada-European Union free-trade pact by year's end, saying it could boost the economy by \$12 billion annually.

The government estimates the deal would give Canada improved access to a market of 300 million mostly affluent consumers, creating 80,000 jobs across Canada.

But critics say the talks could lead to higher costs for prescription drugs, increased privatization of public services and place too many limits on the ability of governments to control large corporations.

Last week, the European Council indicated it wanted to conclude negotiations "in the coming months," Brinkmann said.

In April, the ambassador warned the trade deal could be blocked because of anger in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria over travel visas imposed on their citizens by Ottawa.

On Monday, Brinkmann said that dispute was also unresolved.

If a deal is struck, it would likely have to be ratified by the European Parliament as well as the individual legislatures of the European Union's 27 member countries.