

Canada says close to agreeing long-delayed EU free-trade deal

Mon May 6, 2013 5:31pm EDT

* Canada-EU talks have dragged for 18 months

* EU now turning its attention to talks with U.S.

May 6 (Reuters) - Canada is close to finalizing a long-delayed free-trade deal with the European Union but will not set a timetable for reaching an agreement, even though the EU is set to start talks with the United States, a top official said on Monday.

Ottawa and Brussels started negotiations to open up access to each other's economies in 2009 and a deal was supposed to be concluded by the end of 2011.

That deadline was pushed back to the end of 2012 but the two sides are still trying to resolve differences over how much beef Canada can export and how much freedom EU companies will have to bid for Canadian government contracts.

"Our negotiators ... (are) bridging the very small remaining handful of issues. These are difficult discussions but our negotiators are finding creative ways of bridging the outstanding gaps," said Canadian Trade Minister Ed Fast.

EU officials say the bloc is already starting to switch its attention to the start of talks on a free-trade deal with the United States, which has an [economy](#) 10 times the size of Canada's, in July.

"Our conclusion of these negotiations will not be driven primarily by a calendar or a timetable. It will be driven by the quality of the deal," Fast told the House of Commons trade committee.

Canadian and EU officials say a deal could generate around \$28 billion in trade and new [business](#) a year.

Fast later told reporters that the two sides were making "excellent progress" but declined to give more details. Negotiators from the two sides started a three-day meeting in Brussels on Monday. (Reporting by David Ljunggren; Editing by Mohammad Zargham)