

Canada-EU free-trade talks progressing; exchange offers on investment, services

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By The Canadian Press

OTTAWA - Trade Minister Ed Fast says Canada and the European Union are a step closer to signing a free trade deal with the exchange of formal offers on services and investment this week in Ottawa.

Fast said in a statement Thursday that "significant progress" had been achieved on market access in the areas of goods, services, investment and government procurement.

"While some issues still need to be resolved, negotiations are now well-advanced and solutions to them are being actively explored," he said in a release.

An exchange of offers dealing with provincial government and European state procurement took place in July.

The offers representing the core negotiating positions of the two sides have not been made public, which opponents have attacked as undemocratic.

But Fast called the development "another milestone" along the process that is scheduled to conclude next year.

The two sides were expected to wrap up the ninth round of formal negotiations Friday, with more sessions planned.

The federal government claims a comprehensive deal with the economically-troubled European continent will result in a 20 per cent increase in bilateral trade, give the Canadian economy a \$12-billion boost

and create almost 80,000 jobs.

The rosy assessment is rejected by unions and other civil society groups who believe Europe has the most to gain from such a deal.

Critics fear a free trade deal with Europe would open up government services such as municipal water facilities to privatization and outside competition, as well as eliminate local preferences for such government spending as Ontario's Green Plan.

In a statement, a coalition of opponents that include the Council of Canadians called for a cessation of talks, saying an agreement would "weaken and prevent social, health and environmental regulations, and protect investors' rights at the expense of democratic rights."