

Ottawa's WTO challenge of EU seal ban 'a matter of principle'

GLORIA GALLOWAY

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The Canadian government will ask the World Trade Organization determine that the European Union should not have placed a ban on Canadian seal products.

The dispute, which pits the concerns of animal-rights activists against the livelihoods in small Canadian sealing communities, comes as Canada is trying to negotiate a comprehensive multi-billion-dollar free-trade agreement with the European states.

A report to a parliamentary committee this week said the sealing issue could have profound ramifications for that deal. But Fisheries Minister Gail Shea said Friday the sealing issue will not affect the free-trade negotiations.

"As a matter of fact both sides have agreed that this issue will be resolved outside the free-trade agreement process and will be resolved at the WTO," Ms. Shea told reporters as a news conference.

"For Canada sealing is about more than fur. The trade of other seal products such as oils and meat represent a growing share of what is already a multi-million dollar business.

Unfortunately, the EU has chosen to proceed with the ban on seal products based on an ill-informed political decision that has no basis in fact or in science."

The WTO challenge is also a way for the government to try to separate

the seal hunt from its free-trade negotiations with the European Union. Though Ottawa wants to keep the issues separate, Newfoundland's position is key, too. The EU wants the deal to include access to Canadian provincial contracts, and European diplomats say it could be scuttled if any province, like Newfoundland, refuses to sign on.

It is time to take the emotion out of the issue and to obtain a ruling based on facts, the minister said.

The negotiations, she said, will be handled by in-house government lawyers and the costs to taxpayers will mostly be related to the price of getting them to Geneva. But Ms. Shea was not able to say how much money would ultimately be involved in defending the seal trade.

"This is a matter of principle," she said, "and the cost does not outweigh the fact that we need to stand up for this legitimate Canadian industry."

The livelihoods of 6,000 Canadian families depends on sealing, said Ms. Shea. For some of them it accounts for two thirds of their income.

"We are deeply disappointed that the European Union continues to oppose Canada's seal hunt despite our repeated efforts to explain that the hunt is human and makes responsible use of a sustainable resource," she said.

"The European parliament has sided with animal rights activists and opted to ignore our arguments, leaving us with no choice but to follow through on our promise to initiate a formal application for the establishment of a World Trade Organization dispute panel to address this matter."