

Canada on track to clinch EU free-trade deal, Tories say

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The Harper government says it's successfully concluded an eighth round of free trade negotiations with the European Union and is on track to clinch a deal by 2012.

During discussions in Brussels this week, Canada and the 27-member country EU traded offers to open up their respective markets in the fields of goods and government purchasing.

International Trade Minister Ed Fast described the eighth round as having made "important progress" toward an agreement.

Canadian officials are declining to release details on what this country is offering the EU in terms of greater access to Canada's markets, saying public release right now would harm Ottawa's negotiating position.

Mr. Fast however hinted that Canada is prepared to offer the Europeans significant concessions, calling both sides' offers on goods and government purchasing "ambitious" in scope.

He tried to assure Canadians however that Ottawa will come away from the table with gains, rather than losses, for employees and businesses in Canada.

"These negotiations represent our most significant trade initiative since the North American Free Trade Agreement, and our government is vigorously defending Canada's interests to ensure that any agreement

we sign benefits Canadian workers, businesses and their families,” Mr. Fast said in a prepared statement.

A Canada-EU joint economic study, released in October 2008, predicted that free trade agreement between the two jurisdictions could boost Canadian economic output by at least \$12-billion annually and bring gains for the country's industries, from aerospace to wood products.

Mr. Fast said a ninth round of FTA talks will take place in October. Before then, however, Canada and the EU will exchange offers on opening up their respective services and investment markets to each other.

During the 2011 federal election campaign, Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised a Conservative government would sign free trade deals with the EU by 2012 and India by 2013

Since taking office in 2006, the Conservatives have made it a priority to pursue trade deals that give Canada preferential access to new markets, an area where two previous Liberal governments failed to make major headway.

In four years, the Harper government concluded new trade agreements with eight countries and conducted negotiations with close to 50 others (including the 27 members of the European Union).

Under the Chrétien and Martin governments, talks began on seven new free-trade agreements and several investor protection deals. But they completed few; the last free-trade deal signed under the Liberals was Costa Rica in 2001.

The Tories have been intent on boosting non-U.S. trade so that Canada is not quite so heavily dependent on one market – a goal shared by many past governments that ultimately failed to accomplish

this.

They're also trying to stay ahead in the worldwide race to clinch special trade arrangements in light of the fact that global talks to accomplish the same thing on a broad basis have foundered for years.

Critics of the FTA talks with the EU warn the proposed deal will hurt Canadian jobs and encourage the privatization of public services.

The Trade Justice Network, a coalition of groups that includes the Council of Canadians and labour organizations, say studies of the proposed Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) would result in between 28,000 and 150,000 lost jobs and increase drug costs by \$2.8-billion. They warn it would also threaten buy-local purchasing policies in Canadian municipalities and utilities.

Opponents are calling on the Harper government to hold public discussions on the EU deal before proceeding.