

Canada pressured EU over its green policy to protect Alberta's oilsands: Documents

BY MIKE DE SOUZA, POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 23, 2011

OTTAWA — A battle over foreign environmental policies that target Alberta's oilsands has spilled over into a meeting between Prime Minister Stephen Harper and European Union President Jose Manuel Barroso, according to newly released EU documents.

The briefing notes prepared by EU officials for the negotiations reveal Canadian officials at the highest levels were pressuring their European counterparts to turn away from stringent environmental policies in order to protect the oilsands industry.

One document, prepared in the context of Harper's meeting with Barroso at a Canada-EU summit in May 2010, noted that Natural Resources Canada officials had requested and obtained a meeting to discuss concerns about a proposed European fuel-quality directive that would restrict imports of fuel originating from Alberta because of its environmental footprint.

"During the meeting it was agreed that the two parties will continue to engage one another in order to help broaden (the EU environment directorate's) understanding of the issues presented," said the briefing note, prepared for the May 5, 2010, meeting.

"Subsequently this issue was also raised at the EU-Canada Trade and Investment Sub-Committee meeting on 7 December 2009 and on 27 April 2010."

The document does not explicitly say whether Harper raised the fuel-quality directive.

International Trade Minister Peter Van Loan said Canada was concerned that the proposed EU emission rules would "unfairly target" Canadian oil, but suggested it was not related to the trade negotiations even though it was being raised at the meetings.

"While of concern, this issue is not linked to our commitment to productive free trade discussions with the European Union," Van Loan said in an email statement. "The recent events unfolding in the Middle East demonstrate once more just how important Canada's oil is to the security and stability of the global economy."

Van Loan was not immediately able to answer why the issue was raised during the trade negotiations.

European officials had expressed concerns that Canada was threatening to scrap a free trade deal if the EU went ahead with environmental policies targeting the oilsands, Reuters reported earlier this week.

But the documents, released to the news agency under freedom-of-information laws, suggest that the EU is proceeding with plans to crack down on fuels that have a heavier footprint on the environment and result in more greenhouse-gas emissions during production.

"DG Environment (the EU environment directorate) will continue to work on developing a methodology that minimizes administrative burden for all suppliers, enhances EU's security of supply, and incentivizes the lowering of GHG intensity of fossil fuels and

dissuades consumption of high GHG intensity fossil fuels," said a briefing note prepared by European officials for a meeting with Canadian ambassador Ross Hornby.

The office of the EU environment commissioner could not immediately be reached for comment.

A spokesman for Harper's office referred questions to Van Loan and provided a copy of a statement from last year, which highlighted that the prime minister had discussed the economy at the EU summit, along with such other issues as peace, security, development, democracy and climate change.

Graham Saul, executive director of Climate Action Network Canada, said the documents demonstrate that the government is actually using the trade negotiations to undermine international action to fight climate change.

"These briefing notes clearly show that the prime minister is actively involved in trying to weaken climate policies in other countries," said Saul. "(Environment Minister) Peter Kent says that Canada has a plan to fight climate change. Well unfortunately, it seems that their plan is to fight climate-change action in other countries."