

Canada, EU hope to sign free-trade deal soon

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BRUSSELS –The European Union and Canada aim to conclude a free-trade agreement in the next few weeks after a top-level meeting over a deal that could swell bilateral trade by more than 20 per cent.

“Both sides will now instruct their negotiators to narrow the gaps on the outstanding issues,” the Commission said in a statement on Friday, after Thursday’s meeting between EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht and Canadian Trade Minister Ed Fast.

Negotiators have struggled over investment protection, agriculture, public procurement and intellectual property, particularly regarding pharmaceuticals, trade experts say.

“It’s clear that there has been significant progress but some important work remains to be done,” De Gucht said in the statement, which said a deal could arrive in “the coming weeks.”

A free-trade agreement (FTA) with Canada, the EU’s 12th-largest trading partner last year, would be the bloc’s first with a country from the G7 group of major developed economies.

For Canada, it would be the most significant since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Mexico in 1994 and an opportunity to diversify exports away from the United States. The EU is its second-largest trading partner

Efforts to conclude a global trade deal have been deadlocked for more than a decade, leaving countries and trading blocs to negotiate independently on bilateral agreements.

A study in 2008 said an FTA could swell EU gross domestic product by 11.6 billion euros (\$14.9 billion) and Canada’s by C\$12 billion (\$12 billion) within seven years, with EU exports to Canada rising 24.3 per

cent and Canadian exports to the EU by 20.6 per cent. Trade between the two was \$117 billion in 2011.