

Conservatives hit the road to sell EU deal

BY JORDAN PRESS, POSTMEDIA NEWS

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OTTAWA — The Conservative government moved Friday to fill a public relations vacuum that has enveloped free trade talks between Canada and the European Union, holding 18 public events nationwide and launching an online portal with facts and myths about the deal.

The Conservatives have talked about the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) for weeks, but without being able to divulge the text of the agreement. An information vacuum ensued, with critics filling the hole.

Friday's marketing blitz marked a change in tactics for the government to get the public interested in an agreement about which few know, or care to know, about.

"The problem is not that there's a lot of people opposing it, it's that nobody's paying attention," said Michael Hart, an expert on international trade from Carleton University in Ottawa. "It's a real yawner."

Underlying the marketing blitz was the government's position that it is being transparent about the process, announcing the launch of a website with facts about the deal.

But without the text of the deal being public, which won't happen until the pact is finalized and served up for ratification, the website didn't provide a whole lot of insight into exact details of the agreement.

"We don't know all that much. We can infer a great deal," said Bob Wolfe, an expert in trade negotiations from Queen's University in Kingston, Ont.

The free trade deal with the EU is the largest the Conservatives have attempted since coming to office, and, if finalized, would be the largest free trade deal signed since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

"Unfortunately, anti-trade activists continue to spread falsehoods about trade," said International Trade Minister Ed Fast. "These are the same falsehoods spread about the NAFTA negotiations a generation ago by the same groups.

"They were proven wrong then, and they are just as wrong now. We must fight their fearmongering with facts, and their falsehoods with reality."

The Conservatives have said free trade with the EU could add \$12 billion annually to Canada's economy and boost trade by \$38 billion. The deal is not just about free trade, which eliminates tariffs at the border, but greater economic integration with the EU.

"They're making all kinds of assumptions in trade and services that are not going to happen," Hart said. "It isn't that there are barriers (to

trade), it's most sensitive to distance."

On Friday, the Tories also argued the deal would create 80,000 jobs, but critics were quick to question how the government came to its conclusions, citing a lack of evidence.

"You don't have much to go on except looking at other free trade agreements," said Ted Woynillowicz from the Council of Canadians. "Instead of having 18 ministers fanned across the country, we should have MPs fan across their constituencies to discuss (CETA)."

The Council of Canadians has been vocal in its opposition to CETA, as have some municipalities and unions that fear the agreement could have effects on domestic jobs and privatize public services.

"The government left a bit of a vacuum and it's been filled to a degree by unions and the Council of Canadians protesting," said Jason Langrish, executive director for the Canada Europe Roundtable for Business.

The opposition called Friday's blitz a "dog-and-pony show," according to NDP foreign affairs critic Paul Dewar, but the push Friday wasn't the big sell of a deal that has yet to be made public, Langrish said. That, he said, will happen when the text becomes public.

Free-trade talks between Canada and the EU have been going on since May 2009. An EU official said this week the deal is "75 per cent" done and should be completed by the end of the year, a timeline Wolfe said is reasonable to meet.

Rules of origin — which determine what goods can be subject to tariffs — and supply management of agricultural goods continue to be points of contention between the two parties. Intellectual property rights on areas such as pharmaceuticals has been another lightning rod.

The association representing generic drug producers came out in favour of CETA, but was cautious about provisions on intellectual property rights that could delay when generic drugs can hit the market and increase costs to provinces and consumers.

"We have been concerned about the EU's proposals since we found out about them," said Jeff Connell, vice-president, corporate affairs, for the Canadian Generic Pharmaceutical Association.

"They're fear mongering," said Russell Williams, president of Rx&D, which represents brand name producers. "There is no relation to (intellectual property) and pricing."

Dozens of Canadian cities have asked the government for exemptions from the agreement, worried the pact will limit their ability to award contracts to local organizations. However, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities continues to support the deal, but is still looking for more details to help its cities understand what could happen to them under CETA.

FCM president Berry Vrbanovic said the government's promise that CETA will meet the needs of municipalities should address some of the concerns from cities.