

EU negotiations 'Intense' trade talks down to details

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OTTAWA -- Trade talks with the European Union have entered an "intense" stage with only specific issues needing to be hammered out, Trade Minister Ed Fast said Tuesday.

And perhaps somewhat of a surprise is that the issue of opening up provincial government procurement to outside bidders doesn't appear to be a sticking point, with both Ontario and B.C. ministers suggesting they are on board.

Fast said reaching an agreement with Europe and its 500 million consumers and \$17-trillion economy is Canada's top trade priority, bigger than China, India or the newly forming Trans-Pacific Partnership.

According to a government analysis, a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU could boost the country's gross domestic product output by \$12 billion annually, and create 80,000 new jobs. "We are now into very intense negotiations on the specific issues that remain to be negotiated, on a sector-by-sector basis," Fast told reporters after a closed-door meeting with provincial counterparts in Ottawa.

"It will likely be the most ambitious agreement that either one of the two parties has ever entered into."

Since talks began in the autumn of 2009, Canada and the EU have conducted nine formal rounds of negotiations and Fast said he doesn't anticipate a 10th.

But the minister would not confirm reports a deal could be reached as early as April. Instead, he suggested dotting the i's and crossing the t's may take longer than anticipated.

"We need to negotiate the very best agreement for Canada and if that takes a couple of extra months so be it," he said, adding his target remains the end of 2012.

All provincial and territorial ministers signed onto a general statement on the importance of diversifying trade and the importance of a deal with Europe, although some, including Quebec, did not appear at the joint news conference.

Both ministers representing Ontario and British Columbia said they supported the Harper government's approach and suggested the area of provincial government procurement, which has typically not been part of the free trade agreements, would not be a deal-breaker.

-- The Canadian Press