

European Parliament slams Canada's oilsands, asbestos, sealing industries

BY PETER O'NEIL, POSTMEDIA NEWS

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The European Parliament took shots Wednesday at Canada over the oilsands industry's environmental record, ongoing asbestos exports and the sealing industry while endorsing progress made in Canada-Europe free trade talks.

The statement, adopted by a show of hands at a plenary session in Strasbourg, France, is intended as a political statement directed at both Canada and the European Commission, the EU's administrative arm that is handling negotiations.

"MEPs (members of the European Parliament) from most political groups welcomed progress in negotiating the agreement with such an important trading partner for the EU," said a news release summarizing the European Parliament's consensus view.

"Parliament nonetheless raised some potential concerns. One was the environmental impact of extracting oil from tarsands, due to its high CO2 emissions and its local impact on biodiversity," the release stated.

"Another was serious harm to the health of workers mining asbestos, the processing and use of which is already banned in the EU."

MEPs also urged both Canada and the EU to not let the dispute over

Europe's ban on seal products, now being challenged at the World Trade Organization, "impede" free trade talks. They also called on the commission to "remain firm" in its position on the seal hunt that is widely viewed among parliamentarians as cruel.

A media spokesman in Strasbourg said the MEPs are aware many of the issues it has raised are not part of the negotiations, including seals, oilsands and asbestos.

But he said the parliamentarians did want to signal its political concerns if an agreement comes before the legislature for ratification.

Some MEPS are currently pressuring the European Commission to produce a long-promised directive that labels energy from the oilsands industry as more polluting than oil and gas from conventional production systems.

The Canadian government has aggressively fought against the directive, and one media report — denied by Ottawa — suggested that the dispute could threaten free trade negotiations.

MEPS also expressed concern Wednesday about the willingness of provincial governments to honour an expected commitment in the trade deal to open up provincial and municipal procurement contracts to European bidders.

They urged provincial and territorial governments to "synchronize policies and procedures," and called for "explicit commitments" from those governments.

MEPs also expressed preference for an agreement on intellectual property protection that provides strict protection for "trademarks,

patents and geographical indications" while not hampering production of cheaper generic drugs.

The negotiations were launched in 2008 and are expected to conclude at the end of this year, but Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced during the election campaign that he didn't expect a deal until sometime in 2012.

The deal is expected to sharply reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers, open up government procurement to offshore competition, and liberalize trade in services.

The Canadian government has argued that the deal will add \$12 billion to the nation's economic output annually, though several experts say that figure is exaggerated.