

Farmers decry Canada-EU trade pact plan

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OTTAWA — Canadian farmers on Friday decried a Canada-European Union trade pact under negotiation, saying they fear the loss of a practice of saving, reusing, exchanging, and selling seeds.

"This is far more sweeping than any trade agreement we've ever seen," Terry Boehm, president of the National Farmers Union, told a press conference.

According to a draft of the agreement, currently in its fifth round of negotiations, the pact would create intellectual property rights enforcement provisions that go far beyond Canada's existing laws -- allowing for the seizure of property for alleged infringements, including crop seeds.

Canadian farmers traditionally buy new varieties of seed each year but also keep some harvested for use in the next season. More and more seeds are genetically modified and patented.

"For a farmer, he could lose his farm, his equipment and crops he's growing for using his own seeds if these are alleged to have been patented, before even having his day in court," said Boehm.

"This is absolutely draconian beyond any responsible measure anywhere and will create a culture of fear in the countryside."

The National Farmers Union also expressed concern that Canada's supply management, farm support programs and the Canadian Wheat Board would be at risk under the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement.

As well, the farmers blasted a proposed prohibition on cities, schools or hospitals giving preference to locally grown foods; a clause that states Canadian food safety standards could not exceed international standards; and, another that stipulates imported foods cannot be inspected until after

a problem has occurred.

Canada's trade minister has said the two sides are on track to finalize a free trade agreement in 2011. Official talks for a Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement were launched in June 2009.

The European Union is Canada's largest export market after the United States, with Canadian exports to the EU totaling 29.8 billion Canadian dollars (18.8 billion euros) last year.