

Ottawa will defend Canada's dairy and poultry in EU trade talks: Blackburn

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MONTREAL - Canada's minister of state for agriculture says Ottawa will defend the supply management system of dairy and poultry products in any free trade talks with the European Union.

Jean-Pierre Blackburn won't be taking part in the next round of talks between Canada and its second largest trading partner - he'll be in the Netherlands commemorating Canada's contribution to that country's liberation in the Second World War.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Minister of International Trade Peter Van Loan will be among the federal politicians in Brussels for the Canada-EU summit on May 5.

But Blackburn weighed-in on the talks and said the federal government remains committed to backing its dairy and poultry industries.

"There is a need for new markets for the food sector like any other sector," he told The Canadian Press. "But at the same time we know some specific aspects have to be protected."

He said supply management allowed dairy and poultry industries to remain among the most profitable and stable in Canada.

Canada adopted a supply management system for milk in the 1970s. The industry sets production quotas and limits importation of foreign dairy and poultry products.

"Here in Canada, supply management works," said the minister.

"If we open our borders there will be huge difficulties for these sectors. There would need to be changes for the way we do things. And we're functioning very well in Canada."

Canada's dairy industry has previously proven to be a sticking point in other trade talks.

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key has said publicly he didn't want Canada joining Trans Pacific Partnership talks because it wants dairy exempted from any trade deal.

The president of the Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, Yuen Pau Woo, has echoed Key's claims.

But Blackburn said the Conservatives and Canada's agriculture industry have long had a strong relationship.

"It's part of the Conservative government's tradition, to be close to the farmers," he said.