

Geneva Watch

An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

Editorial: Texts It Shall Be

After much debate and dithering as to whether negotiating groups' chairs should circulate revised texts or simply a report assessing the state-of-play of the Doha Round, it finally looks like the WTO Director General, Pascal Lamy, has made up his mind. He has opted to stay with his original plan which is to release texts on all areas of the talks to "show where the convergences and the divergences are," and this despite warnings from key players that it may do more harm than good to the already ailing negotiations. Lamy said he will provide an assessment of the state of play to the full Membership, once Members have received the texts, so they can collectively decide on the way forward, which means that those who want to reject the texts outright would have to face the inevitable consequences of being blamed for "killing" the Round.

Agriculture Consultations

Ambassador Walker held an open-ended meeting with the full Membership on April 5th to remind delegates that a "contribution" is still expected from them to fulfil the objective set out by the Trade Negotiations Committee to circulate draft modalities texts through a "bottom-up" approach by Easter.

Since the beginning of the year, Members failed to advance on the remaining outstanding matters, the so-called "bracketed or otherwise annotated issues". Some technical discussions have taken place on tariff simplification and the Special Safeguard Mechanism but without concrete progress, sources said.

At this point in time, it is unlikely that Members will engage seriously in discussions held within the negotiating groups as it is believed that most delegates are waiting for the outcome of Pascal Lamy's confessionals with the Group of seven (Australia, Brazil, China, EU, India, Japan, U.S.) to gather their perspectives on potential next steps before re-engaging in the talks.

In the meantime, several small consultation meetings are taking place under the leadership of various countries. This is the case with India who is planning to convene a meeting with a group of countries on issues that require clarification in the current draft modalities text.

The open-ended meeting lasted a bit longer than previous meetings thanks to a presentation made by Egypt on food security, price volatility and export restrictions.

The NFIDC group said that the impact of soaring food prices – which, according to the FAO, have hit a new record high in February, driven mostly by higher prices of cereals, meat and dairy products – has resulted in a net increase in extreme poverty of about 44 million people in low and middle-income countries and mostly in NFIDCs and LDCs "as their share of food purchases in their total expenditures is much higher than that of industrialized countries."

The group cites various decisions over the years, including members' commitments to allow developing countries special treatment in general, and again in the Doha Round negotiations, and suggests including the following paragraph among other modifications in the next revised draft modalities text for agriculture:

"Where a non-NFIDC Member institutes a new export prohibition or restriction on foodstuffs in accordance with paragraph 2(a) of Article XI of GATT 1994, that Member shall not apply that prohibition or restriction on exports of foodstuffs to NFIDCs and LDCs."

Discussion went back and forth on this matter (mainly because there was nothing else to discuss) but in the end, delegations generally sympathized with the NFIDC group saying that they would look at the proposal. Some added that all countries are affected by high food prices and that food security and prices volatility should be handled by removing distortions in all areas of agricultural trade, not just by focusing on export restrictions and special treatment for some countries.

Upcoming Events

- Agriculture Consultations, April 4-15, 2011
- Director General Confessionals, April 4-15, 2011
- Revised Draft Modalities Texts, Easter 2011
- WTO General Council, May 3-4, July 27-28, October 12-13, December 1-2, 2011
- APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade Meeting, May 19-20, Montana (U.S.)
- OECD 50th Anniversary Forum and Council, May 23-27, 2011, Paris (France)
- Regular Agriculture Committee, June 23, September 29, and November 2011
- 37th G-8 Summit, June, Deauville (France)
- G-20 Summit on Agriculture, June 22-23, 2011, Paris (France)
- Third Global Review of Aid for Trade July 18-19, 2011
- Potential DDA Mini-Ministerial Meeting (Modalities), July 2011 (TBC)
- WTO Public Forum, September 19-21, 2011
- G-20 Summit, November 3-4, 2011, Cannes (France)
- APEC Ministerial Meeting, November 11, 2011
- WTO Ministerial Conference (MC8), December 15-17, 2011

Geneva Watch is published by Dairy Farmers of Canada, Chicken Farmers of Canada, Egg Farmers of Canada, Turkey Farmers of Canada and Canadian Hatching Egg Producers to report on the various events occurring in Geneva, particularly on the WTO negotiations on agriculture.

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