

Geneva Watch

An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

Editorial: Renewed Pledge (or sort of)

Another week has passed without substantial movement on the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) front. There were some renewed “weak” pledges (from APEC Trade Ministers draft declaration and U.S.-EU summit in Washington) to conclude the round by the end of 2010 but no real progress. Without faster or more significant progress, the date targeted for completion of the DDA becomes more improbable unless modalities are struck early next year. With Brazil now expected to hold stock-taking sessions with fellow developing countries on the margins of the ministerial conference, the only “good” news for pro-Doha Members this past week could be – barring surprises – the likely confirmation of both U.S. ambassador to the WTO Michael Punke and chief agricultural negotiator, Islam Siddiqui.

U.S.-EU Summit

The U.S.-EU summit in Washington, this week, provided nothing less than futile political rhetoric about the need to conclude the round by 2010. It is clear that with the ongoing focus on its health care reform, the Obama administration cannot do more than reiterate what trade observers have already qualified as the “Pittsburgh’s empty promises”. Indeed, in their final statement, the two WTO giants affirm their “commitment to reach an ambitious, comprehensive and balanced agreement based on the progress already made, including with regard to modalities.” In other words, the exact same wording taken out from the G-20 leaders’ declaration made in Pittsburgh earlier this year.

That said, hearings of Michael Punke and Islam Siddiqui – respectively the White House choices for U.S. Ambassador to the WTO and Chief Agriculture Negotiator – have provided plenty of insight as to where the U.S. stands on the current Doha negotiations.

Punke and Siddiqui have both endorsed the U.S. general perception that emerging developing countries need to provide more market access before the U.S. could consider what is on the table. “From my meetings and conversations with members of Congress, with your staffs and with various stakeholders groups, I understand very clearly: No deal is better than a bad deal,” Punke told the Senate Finance Committee. The trade nominee believes the U.S. still needs additional time to analyze Doha’s package deal after being warned by some Congressmen that anything short of a good deal for the U.S. will certainly be “dead on arrival” before Congress.

Punke, however, said he believes that a good deal was still achievable, but agreed with the notion that there was nothing to gain from forcing an outcome that would not work for the U.S. Congress. “The worst possible outcome in Doha would be to accept something in Geneva, bring it back to Congress, and have Congress reject it,” Punke said.

With the U.S. unemployment rate continuing to climb (over 10%) and still expected to rise until the country fully reconnects with strong growth, it is unlikely that the new administration will rush into signing new trade agreements anytime soon as they are perceived as detrimental to the slowly recovering U.S. economy.

Non-Agricultural Market Access (NAMA) Week

Meanwhile in Geneva, most of the week was devoted to analyzing the different proposals on NAMA's non trade barriers (NTB), and how to solve them through bilateral and plurilateral meetings.

The Chair, Ambassador Luzius Wasescha, admitted that NTB negotiations failed to reach the 80% mark, leaving it somewhat behind the overall Doha negotiations. "The NAMA apple is still not ripe enough to be eaten," Wasescha claimed.

At the transparency session held on November 6th, the chair showed satisfaction at the good exchange of views and constructive interaction between Members. On sectorals, however, Members have continued with bilateral meetings without providing details on the outcome of their discussions. According to one official familiar with the sectoral discussions, the U.S. has yet to meet with China on that particular subject. The talks up to now have not recorded any substantial progress, the official said.

Upcoming Events

- FAO CSO Forum, Nov. 12-13, 2009 (Rome)
- FAO World Food Summit, Nov. 16-18, 2009 (Rome)
- Agriculture Consultations week Nov. 16 and Dec. 7, 2009
- Regular Agriculture Committee, Nov. 19, 2009; March 11-2, June 10-11, Sept. 16-17, Nov. 18-19, 2010
- Senior Officials Meeting, week of Nov 23-27, Dec 14-16
- 7th WTO Ministerial Conference, November 30–December 2, 2009
- General Council, December 17-18, 2009

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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ISSN 1496-9254



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