

Editorial: Buckle Up! Here Comes the DDA...in 2011

WTO Members are set to return to the type of intensive discussions that led to the Ministerial meeting of July 2008, which also means a return to negotiations on the nitty gritty technical details that have prevented the negotiations from progressing the past few years. After the ambassador-led brainstorming sessions fail to deliver the breakthrough sought, Members are now poised to hand the “hot potato” to the negotiating group chairmen with a target of yet another mini-ministerial meeting in 2011. Hence, to ensure things run smoothly, it is becoming increasingly critical to get the agriculture chairman replacement process started.

Lamy: Time for “Intensified Engagement”

WTO Director General Pascal Lamy has invited delegates to attend an informal Trade Negotiations Committee (TNC) on November 30th to discuss the way forward with the Doha negotiations following G-20 and APEC leaders’ call for work to be intensified in Geneva and with the view to take full advantage of the 2011 “narrow” window of opportunity to conclude the Round.

“Both instances [G-20 Summit in Seoul (Korea) and APEC Leaders and Ministers meeting in Yokohama (Japan)] sent strong signals of political resolve to conclude the Doha Development Round,” Lamy stressed at a meeting in Geneva on November 15th, reminding the audience that leaders called for “intensified engagement and for negotiations across the board to conclude the end game.”

“In short, they provided a clear signal that they expect the Doha Development Round to be a deliverable next year,” Lamy said.

It is now up to delegates to make the necessary adjustments to start the so-called “give and take” discussions that will lead to conclude the Round sometime next year. “Since June last year, Members have been testing flexibilities in various formats,” Lamy said, insisting that “[t]his process must now intensify in order to ‘walk the talk’.”

Renewed Energy

Without a doubt, last week’s events have injected a new life into the negotiations which have been rather moribund the past two years following the July 2008 ministerial meeting. There seems to be a genuine desire to ride the current momentum by multiplying meetings in order to keep the Doha Round in the spotlight.

As such, a group of key WTO countries who have been involved in the brainstorming sessions are expected to hold a meeting the week of November 22nd to discuss the negotiations’ next steps. It is expected that Members will agree to return to the chair-led process in order to narrow their differences on the remaining outstanding technical issues with the view to table revised draft modalities texts.

On the political side, EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht plans to hold a G-5 (Brazil, China, EU, India and U.S.) Ministerial meeting in Brussels to build on the momentum gained in Seoul and discuss Doha’s potential “give and take” across the board.

Pushing for an Aggressive Trade Agenda

Doha’s fortune rose sharply since the Republicans won the midterm elections in the U.S., taking control of the House of Representatives. Observers now say the U.S. is more likely to ratify pending trade deals with a more compliant Congress, even though some may question the position of the so-called “Tea Party” Republicans.

Republican lawmaker, Kevin Brady, seen as the next chairman of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Trade, wants to pursue an aggressive trade agenda that would seek to ratify pending free trade agreements (Colombia, Korea and Panama).

Brady also roots for trade promotion authority (TPA) to be granted to President Obama and says this request should receive bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate.

Obama, who has recently changed his stance on trade, putting it at the centre of potential job creation in the U.S. by boosting U.S. exports, may soon be in position to pass new trade deals that would not require congressional amendments, should he be granted the TPA.

During the working lunch on trade in Seoul, Obama reportedly said he is willing to risk bringing a Doha agreement before Congress for approval. With the TPA in his hands, the U.S. President may be pressured even more to “walk the talk”.

Upcoming Events

- OECD Global Forum on Agriculture, November 29-30, 2010, Paris (France)
- Informal Trade Negotiations Committee, November 30
- Agriculture Consultations, Week of December 6, 2010
- General Council, Dec.14-15, 2010
- G-5 Ministerial Meeting (Brussels, Date TBC)
- Regular Agriculture Committee, March 31, 2011; June, September and November 2011
- G-20 Summit on Agriculture, May 23-24, 2011, Paris (France)
- WTO Ministerial Conference (MC8), December 15-17, 2011

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