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An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

Negotiators to Meet Ahead of February TPP Ministerial Meeting

After several days of uncertainty, Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Trade Ministers will hold another meeting in Singapore on February 22–25, 2014, the Singaporean government has confirmed. In preparation for the ministerial gathering, TPP chief negotiators and subject matter experts will also be meeting in Singapore to advance the issues that will be later taken up by Ministers.

It has been reported that the talks will move rapidly toward a conclusion once the U.S. and Japan resolve their issues, particularly in the areas of market access for agricultural products and automobiles. Although not a lot of information has come to light from this parallel negotiation, sources say the two countries have not yet been able to resolve their differences.

This past weekend, U.S. Trade Representative, Michael Froman, met with Japan's Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy, Akira Amari, in Washington to discuss outstanding issues in the negotiations between the two countries. Officials reported that the two largest economies in the TPP talks reviewed the current state of the negotiations and agreed to continue to work together in Singapore toward completing successfully a high-standard, comprehensive agreement.

“TPP is a key opportunity to address long-standing barriers and other issues of access to Japan's market for U.S. exporters and workers,” Froman stressed, adding that “securing strong outcomes with Japan, including for American autos and agriculture, remains a high priority.”

Last October, the 12 countries involved in the TPP talks were aiming for full clarity on how all tariff lines will be treated by the time of the ministerial gathering held in December, but this objective was still far from being achieved. Japan, for instance, has not been able to define how it will treat items from the so-called “5 sacred categories” – dairy; wheat and barley; sugar and starch; rice; and meat (beef and pork).

Moreover, the USTR, for its part, is trying to secure a bipartisan trade promotion authority (TPA) and is currently engaging with Congress members by showing more transparency on the talks than they have in the past with the goal of helping to secure a rapid deal on the TPA. It is in that respect that the USTR planned briefings with U.S. stakeholders – the so-called advisory committee – on the status of the talks, a week in advance of the Singapore gathering.

At the end of their meeting in Washington, both Froman and Amari agreed on the importance of narrowing differences between all TPP countries on agriculture and other market access and rules issues. The two welcomed the progress achieved thus far in their bilateral talks, but noted that differences remain, particularly in the negotiations on automotive trade. They instructed their teams to continue this work next week in Singapore and Tokyo.

Similar to Salt Lake City, where chief negotiators were accompanied by several negotiating groups dealing with chapters that still lag behind, observers expect issues such as intellectual property (IP), state-owned enterprises (SOE), environment, labor, market access for goods and agriculture to be tackled in Singapore.

Few, meanwhile, anticipate an announcement on a deal to be made at the upcoming ministerial gathering. However, the meeting will serve as a catalyst to help push the talks ahead with the view to get something tangible by the time of President Obama's trip to Asia (April 2014) where a stop in Japan already appears to be critical, as both leaders expect to raise the issue with the hope of announcing concrete development in the TPP negotiations, one informed source said.

Upcoming Events

- TPP Chief Negotiators Meeting, February 17–22, 2014, Singapore
- TPP Ministerial Meeting, February 22–25, 2014, Singapore
- Regular Agriculture Committee, March 14, June 6, November 13, 2014
- WTO General Council, March 14, May 8-9, July 24-25, Oct.7-8, Dec. 10–12, 2014
- OECD Forum 2014, May 5-6, 2014, Paris (France)
- G-20 Trade Ministers Meeting, July 19, 2014, Sydney (Australia)
- G-20 Leaders Summit, November 15-16, 2014, Brisbane (Australia)

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Legal Deposit: National Library of Canada, ISSN 1496-9254

