



AN OVERVIEW OF THE WTO NEGOTIATIONS ON AGRICULTURE

Agriculture, Top Priority for MC14

The Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoASS or the agriculture negotiating group) met on December 4-6, 2024, to discuss progress in the negotiations. Nigeria informed Members of the progress of the joint work that the African Group has undertaken with the Cairns Group since October with the aim of developing a package of modalities covering all agricultural subjects to be agreed at the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

The main progress was reported in the area of domestic support (DS), with efforts focused on integrating elements from the proposals made by both groups. Discussions focused on key aspects of the DS file, including capping trade-distorting support, designing and implementing reductions, granting new product-specific flexibilities for non-exporters, ensuring discipline in the use of the Green Box and limiting concentrated support for cotton.

Other issues, such as market access (MA), special safeguard mechanism (SSM), export competition (EC) and export restrictions (ER), have not yet been addressed, Nigeria added. The two groups plan to collaborate further with Members to advance these topics before MC14.

Several members of the Cairns Group, including Canada, along with the EU, Japan, Switzerland and the UK have stressed that all issues addressed in the agricultural negotiations are interlinked and should be discussed together.

The difficult issue of public stockholdings (PSH) remains challenging with current priorities centered on product-specific feasibility for developing country members and additional flexibilities beyond the final cap for public stockholding programs.

Guyana presented a new proposal highlighting the need to prioritize PSH, SSM and cotton through text-based negotiations within the existing dedicated sessions. It further calls on the CoASS Chair, Ambassador Alparslan Acarsoy (Türkiye) to draft texts on other key pillars (MA, DS and EC).

“Legacy Issues”

Many Members were encouraged by Dr Ngozi's statement before the full membership, in which she outlined her thoughts and vision for the next four years. Dr Ngozi, whose second four-year term as WTO Director-General was approved at a special meeting of the General Council on November 28, 2024 identified agriculture negotiations as a top priority in the short and medium term, that is to say the next 15 months preceding MC14.

Aside from agreements on export subsidies in 2015 in Nairobi and the lifting of World Food Program (WFP) export restrictions at MC12 in 2022, there has been little substantial progress in the agriculture negotiations, Dr Ngozi told all Members.

“In a world where food security is a big problem (...) we need therefore to move forward on agriculture negotiations in order to be part of the solution to global food security.” She seeks to achieve results by working to resolve “legacy issues” while also focusing on new areas. “So, over the next 15 months, leading to MC14, as Trade Negotiations Committee Chair, my goal is to support Members to intensify negotiations with a view to delivery at MC14,” she emphasized.

Her short-term plan also includes completing work on reforming the dispute settlement system to restore a fully functional appellate body, revisit the existing Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing measures, created in 1995, and finally, conclude a deal on phase 2 of the fisheries subsidies negotiations.

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The latter took a hit on December 13 when the Chair of the fisheries subsidies negotiations, Ambassador Einar Gunnarsson (Iceland), decided to withdraw the inclusion of the two draft decisions relating to fisheries subsidies from the agenda of the General Council of December 16 and 17 due to the refusal of India and Indonesia to join the consensus.

“Save for any last-minute solution, it seems to me that, as one Member has put it, the negotiations have reached a stalemate even though nearly all Members can support the current text as a basis for conclusion. The balancing measures so strongly requested by a couple of Members would clearly unbalance the text for a large group of Members. At this point, it is not obvious to me how Members might want to take the negotiations forward, and we need to reflect over what viable alternatives we have,” Ambassador Gunnarsson stressed.

“We must use the time between the winter break and MC14 effectively,” Dr Ngozi added. She calls on Members to complete work in Geneva on virtually all outstanding negotiating files so that Ministers can simply approve the results and focus on two key issues: agriculture and reform of the dispute settlement system. She suggests that Ministers do not come for more than two to three days at MC14 to be held sometime during the first quarter of 2026 in Cameroon.

Among the long-term issues she listed, she said Members should look at food security and sustainable agriculture in a new light to see how they can reap the benefits of artificial intelligence (AI), precision agriculture and new water science to reach agreements that can help feed the world. Work on WTO reform, trade and environment, trade and health, trade and technology, including AI, are also part of her long-term strategy after MC14.

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

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