



Recalibrate the Agriculture Negotiations

The Swiss authorities have extended the shutdown period until mid-May for non-essential activities. Although, the World Trade Organization (WTO) maintained its suspension of all meetings until the end of April, it is unlikely that gatherings of delegates will resume before early June.

The WTO, meanwhile, plans to gradually bring its Secretariat back to headquarters as of next week starting with about 20% of its staff set to return to work on May 11th. The COVID-19 crisis has limited Members' ability to advance negotiations this year, leading the Chair of the agriculture negotiating group, Ambassador Deep Ford (Guyana), to recommend written comments and videoconferences as substitutes for face-to-face meetings in order to progress on as many components as possible "with a view of achieving a balanced, incremental, and meaningful outcome on agriculture in the short to medium term."

In an email sent to delegates on April 24th, Ambassador Ford decided to extend his April 15th deadline for submission of comments on his options paper for MC12 to May 8th, although he already received comments from some Members or group of Members, he stressed.

The chair had identified, based on his consultations with Members, a maximum of two options for each element of the seven negotiating topics on the table for MC12 (namely domestic support, market access, export competition, export restrictions, special safeguard mechanism, public stockholding, and cotton) on which he asked Members to reflect on and provide their comments by May 8th.

The options cover substantive as well as procedural elements and transparency. Whereas some topics are described as almost ready for decision, others, meanwhile, are believed to require more work and

would therefore need Members to agree on a work programme/framework for the medium to long term.

Members' comments on the options will help the Chair formulate a more detailed draft text that would ultimately be presented for consideration at a meeting with senior officials and Ambassadors whenever possible.

"We are in the midst of an unprecedented situation that has changed the way we work and the time horizons for our work," Ford wrote in his email, adding that one of the key messages he received from Members has been "the need to recalibrate the agriculture negotiations as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak" due in most part to governments' complete focus on addressing the immediate impacts of the health crisis combined with the difficulty of internal coordination within countries and among groups of countries and the uncertainty surrounding the MC12 dates, as well as the impact the coronavirus is having on agricultural markets and food security.

Members will need to strike "the right balance between the continuation of the work undertaken in the last two years and the integration of new priorities, inputs, approaches and visions following the COVID-19 crisis," Ford said.

Ensure Open and Predictable Trade in Agriculture

On April 22nd, a coalition of countries¹ including Canada, issued a joint statement calling for borders and trade to remain open following the COVID-19 crisis to ensure a strong economic recovery.

¹ Australia; Brazil; Canada; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; European Union; Hong Kong, China; Japan; Republic of Korea; Malawi; Mexico; New Zealand; Paraguay; Peru; Qatar; Singapore; Switzerland; The Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu; Ukraine; United Kingdom; United States; and Uruguay.

“As Members take measures to address the pandemic, it is imperative that these measures do not adversely affect trade in agriculture and agri-food products which would ultimately have negative impacts on the food security, nutrition, and health of Members and their populations,” the joint statement reads.

Much like the recent calls regarding the importance of open trade in ensuring flow of vital medical supplies, the coalition – which accounts for 63% of global exports and 55% of overall imports agriculture and agri-food products – insisted particularly on the importance of “maintaining agriculture supply chains and preserving the ability of Members to import agriculture and agri-food products to meet their domestic needs.”

This would allow to avoid food shortages and high risks of food insecurity. The main goal of this proposal is to prevent the implementation of multiple protectionist measures in the months to come, following the COVID-19 crisis.

Ford, for his part, intends to circulate a first draft of the compilation of comments he received on his options paper by Mid-May.

“I am opting to circulate the responses with attribution after considering the comments by several Members that doing so would significantly facilitate the work of

delegations in Geneva and in Capitals, particularly the smaller ones,” he stressed in his April 24th note.

He said he is currently exploring various options on the process going forward. His immediate plan would be to hold a video conference to discuss his mid-May paper and brainstorm how future agriculture work may be conducted.

Alternative Dates & Location for MC12

On April 27th, the Kazakhstan delegation circulated a communication offering to host the MC12 in June 2021 in Nur-Sultan.

“As a result of consultations within the Government, I am glad to inform that the Republic of Kazakhstan remains ready to host the next WTO Ministerial Conference in June 2021 in Nur-Sultan,” the delegation of Kazakhstan wrote in a memo directed to WTO Director General, Roberto Azevêdo.

“Therefore, I kindly ask you and General Council Chair Ambassador David Walker to consult with the WTO Members on Kazakhstan's proposal.”

The suggestion is now before Members. The Kazakh proposal is highly likely to be accepted by the full Membership, an informed source said. There is no alternative at this point other than hosting the meeting in Geneva, which is very unlikely, he added.

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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