

EU free trade would open local markets

APRIL CUNNINGHAM | Telegraph-Journal
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West side port.
Photo: Kâté Braydon/Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN – A free trade deal between Canada and Europe would open new opportunities for export from the Port of Saint John while opening up new markets for lumber, seafood and agricultural products, officials say.

It would impact such local companies as Cooke Aquaculture as they seek to sell products such as smoked salmon now hindered by high tariffs, said marketing director Andrew Lively.

“We have a number of customers in Europe that are interested in our product, but there’s a high tariff right now that makes us uncompetitive,” he said.

The deal was signed in principal on Friday as Prime Minister Stephen Harper met with the European commissioner in Brussels. It could be another two years before the agreement comes into effect.

Saint John MP Conservative Rodney Weston said the local region stands to benefit greatly from the deal.

“The key for us here in Saint John is our natural, geographic advantage with the Port of Saint John,” Weston said on Friday, hours after returning to the city from the first week of reconvened Parliament in Ottawa.

Weston noted the port’s recently announced new partnership with Hapag-Lloyd, a German shipping line, demonstrates the global connections that could benefit from the trade deal.

“Our economy is so export-driven,” he said. “So to have the opportunities we have in front of us today, with the connections we have with the Port of Saint John and the container lines we have access to, it opens it up even more for us.”

Port CEO Jim Quinn was in meetings in Brazil and was not available for comment.

David Duplisea, the executive director of the Saint John Board of Trade, said the international agreement – which he noted is the largest bilateral initiative since the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed in 1994 – will “open up engines for economic growth.”

He said several sectors could benefit.

“Europe is a huge market and we’re situated geographically ideally to ship to Europe, so we do sit in a nice position,” he said. “It’s a massive market that we now need to look at and say, ‘OK it’s easier to do business now, let’s look and see where we can make a play there.’ ”

The deal has not been well-received by all industries in the country.

Canadian dairy farmers expressed anger and disappointment, saying in a press release the trade agreement “gives away the Canadian cheese market.”

“This deal would displace our local products with subsidized cheeses from European Union and risk our small businesses being shut down or put out of business,” the release said.

Weston, who was a provincial agricultural minister 10 years ago, said the trade deal would protect the country’s supply management. The system regulates the supply of milk, poultry and eggs to meet consumer demand.

“It will be maintained here in New Brunswick as it has in the past,” Weston said. “So I see

opportunities here. It opens cheese from New Brunswick to European markets as well. The supply management model is still very valid and strong.”

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