

# Canada threatens WTO complaint over European seal product ban

## 'This is a black day for Atlantic Canada,' says sealer

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<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2009/05/05/eu-seal-ban-505.html>



[CBC News](#)

*An activist with the International Fund For Animal Welfare poses in front of a huge inflatable seal outside the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, on Tuesday. (Christian Lutz/Associated Press)*

The federal government says it will launch a complaint with the World Trade Organization unless Canada is exempted from the European Parliament's ban on seal products.

"If the EU imposes a trade ban on seal products, it must contain an exemption for any country, like Canada, that has strict guidelines in place for humane and sustainable sealing practices," Trade Minister Stockwell Day said in a release Tuesday.

"If there is no such acceptable exemption, Canada will challenge the ban at the World Trade Organization."

Earlier Tuesday, the European Parliament passed a bill that will ban the import of seal products. The proposed law, which could have severe implications for Canada's annual seal hunt, passed the European Union assembly by a 550-49 vote.

Canadian Fisheries Minister Gail Shea said the European ban "lacks any basis in facts."

"The Canadian seal hunt is guided by rigorous animal welfare principles which are internationally recognized by independent observers," she said in a release.

The legislation, which states that commercial seal hunting is "inherently inhumane," is expected to be endorsed by EU governments in the coming weeks to ensure the ban is in place before next year's hunt.

The pending approval by the countries' parliaments is seen as a formality by many because national envoys endorsed the bill in Tuesday's vote.

## Canada hunt largest in world

The ban will apply to all products and processed goods derived from seals, including their skins, which are used to make fur coats, meat, oil blubber, organs and even omega-3 pills made from seal oil.

"This is a black day for Atlantic Canada," Dingwall, N.S., sealer Robert Courtney told CBC News.

### Quick facts:

The European Union typically accounts for about 15 per cent of Canada's seal exports.

In 2007, Canada exported more than \$13 million worth of seal products, including meat, oil and skins.

South Korea and Japan were the largest consumers of seal meat, while China, South Korea and the United States bought the most seal fat and oil from Canada.

When it comes to seal skins, about 80 per cent are sent to Norway.

*Source: 2007 data from [Department of Fisheries and Oceans](#)*

Canada's East Coast seal hunt is the largest of its kind in the world, with an average annual kill of about 300,000 harp seals. Canada exported around \$2.5 million worth of seal products to EU countries in 2008.

Courtney said money earned from the seal hunt may only make up a small percentage of his annual income, but the hunt protects his livelihood.

"One hundred per cent of my income comes from the ocean and ... we compete for fish with the seals and they're going to be allowed to multiply and multiply and multiply."

If the markets aren't available to sell seal products at some point, a cull might be necessary to keep the size of the seal herds in check, Courtney said.

"That flies in the face of what we've been trying to do all along — is have a market for all the product that we're harvesting," he said.

## 'Rebound we will,' N.L. minister says

Newfoundland and Labrador Fisheries Minister Tom Hedderson said the vote was far from a surprise, but is nonetheless a bad move.

"These parliamentarians had their minds made up a long while ago," Hedderson told CBC News on Tuesday.

"This certainly is a serious kick-back, and one that we're going to have to deal with in the months and years to come," said Hedderson.

He added that most seal products are sold in Asia and in Russia, and he is confident that this year's price slump — mirroring a downward trend for other seafood — will end.

"We want to make sure that we rebound, and rebound we will," Hedderson said.

He said about 6,000 people in Newfoundland and Labrador earn at least part of their livelihood from the seal hunt.

Mayor of the Magdalen Islands Joel Arseneau said the ban is hypocritical because Europeans continue to eat meat and wear leather.

"They seem to have this idea that seals should be ... considered as small human beings, or sacred animals like the cow in India," he said.

Many sealers in Newfoundland and Labrador have opted out of this year's harvest because they said prices have been too low to cover operating costs.

## Canada, Norway may challenge legislation

For now, Canadian sealers are going to have to look for other markets and work to build them, Courtney said. "And I don't know if we can replace the markets that we're losing."

Seals are also hunted in Norway, Namibia, Sweden, Finland and Russia.

Canada and Norway have previously stated they will challenge the ban at the WTO.

The ban will offer some exemptions to Inuit communities in Canada and Greenland so they can continue their traditional hunts of harp and hooded seals, but bars large-scale trading of pelts, oils or meats in the 27-state European Union.

Another exemption will allow for non-commercial and "small-scale" hunts to manage seal populations. However, seal products derived from those hunts will not be allowed to enter the EU.

Some Inuit groups have said Europe's restrictions will place a hefty toll on the many communities that are heavily dependent on the seal hunt.

"We don't have any other way to survive economically," said Joshua Kango, who heads the Nunavut-based Amarok hunters and trappers association and travelled to Strasbourg in a last-ditch attempt to thwart the ban.

The exemption will do little to help the communities when the markets for seal products have been effectively destroyed, said Mary Simon, president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

"Once you destroy a market for one group, it is destroyed for all," Simon said.

EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said the legislation addressed "EU citizens' concerns with regard to the cruel hunting methods of seals."

Arlene McCarthy, who heads the European Parliament's internal market and consumer protection committee, said Canada and others could not ignore the fact that most Europeans are against the hunt and wanted it banned.

McCarthy said that concern took precedence over the concerns of sealers, fishermen and Inuit groups that carry out commercial hunts.

"While we, of course, have sympathy for those particular groups of people, the reality is that we sit here in the European Parliament and that millions of our citizens would like us to do the right thing and ban the cruel trade. They do not want to buy these products,"

McCarthy said.

## Animal rights groups claim victory

Animal rights groups — which believe the hunt is cruel, poorly monitored and provides little economic benefit once costs associated with policing and supporting the hunt are factored in — called passage of the legislation a victory.

"This is a historic moment in the campaign to stop commercial seal hunts around the world, particularly in Canada. This is a really tremendous victory for everyone all over the world who's been calling for this for decades," said Rebecca Aldworth of the Canadian branch of the Humane Society International.

Diana Wallis, a British member of the European Parliament, told CBC News she decided to vote in support of the legislation even though she still had some reservations about the impact on Inuit communities and fish stocks.

She said she decided to vote in favour because the legislation is a compromise and it is not a ban on the hunt — only the products.

## Legislation of compromise

An earlier draft of the legislation would have left the door open for exemptions to countries that could certify their hunting methods are humane, leading Canada to institute new rules to ensure each seal is killed quickly and painlessly.

Canada won a concession in the amended legislation, as EU ports would remain open to the shipment of seal products headed to other markets, including Norway, Russia and China, which together form the bulk of demand for seal products.

However, Rob Cahill of the Fur Institute of Canada said those countries take their fashion cues from the runways of Europe, where seal might no longer be featured.

"If the designers in Paris and Milan can't use seal, then it certainly has the potential to reduce the cachet of seal products," he told CBC News.

The vote to ban trade in seal products comes at an awkward time for Canada. Prime Minister Stephen Harper is heading to Prague this week to discuss strengthening trade with the EU.

The Fur Institute of Canada said it has been told that the seal ban is not on the agenda for that meeting.

*With files from The Associated Press*