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Date: 12/11/2013
Reference: PR 2013/024

EU-US trade talks resume, consumer concerns continue

EU and US delegations meet this week in Brussels to resume their trade talks after last month's US government shutdown halted the second round of negotiations.

A free trade agreement could benefit consumers by upping market pressure to improve products and services, lower prices, increase consumer choice or heighten cooperation on product or food safety on both sides of the Atlantic. But this should not take place at the expense of impairing the existing regulatory environment from which EU consumers derive trust in, amongst others, their food, medicines, consumer goods and internet sales.

Amid growing concerns over NSA surveillance and data gathering revelations, consumer groups also repeated their calls to keep EU data protection laws off the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agenda, conduct negotiations transparently and prevent plans for private courts who award financial compensation to businesses.

Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC and EU Chair of TACD, commented:

"The US spying-scandal brought to light the extent to which our privacy and personal data laws are breached. Such abuse is unacceptable. It is crucial that the EU locks down its data protection laws. Once this issue is settled, then a basis might exist to discuss data flows to the US. Personal data is not a commodity and should be kept out of the trade talks.

"Political assurances that TTIP will not lower protections conflict with commercial intentions to lessen food hygiene standards and repeal financial reforms. Only transparent negotiations will appease civil society's conclusion that hard-fought rights are at risk.

"Commas and brackets are decisive in pacts like these, so we need meaningful input and to be able to review the texts. This is of particular concern given in the US almost 600 advisors from corporations and industry groups have access to negotiation documents.

"We strongly oppose this trade deal including an investor/state dispute resolution system². Business should not be given the right under TTIP to claim financial compensation from governments who tighten up consumer protection in future. Recent cases against medicine patent standards or anti-tobacco measures should be a reminder for the EU not to hand over the reins of power to private courts."

ENDS

¹ Resolutions of the Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue (TACD) on chemicals, food, e-commerce, financial regulation, investor/state dispute resolution, data flows and intellectual property rights are available at www.tacd.org

² Investor/state dispute resolution mechanisms apply under free trade agreements or bilateral investment treaties. They empower foreign investors to challenge national authorities in order to claim financial compensation when their investment potential (and related profits) are deemed hindered by regulatory or policy changes.