



AN OVERVIEW OF THE WTO NEGOTIATIONS ON AGRICULTURE

The Return of Donald Trump and its Consequences

On Saturday, November 9, Ambassador Petter Ølberg, Chairman of the WTO General Council (GC), informed Members that following the nomination period for the appointment of the WTO Director-General (DG), the only application received for this position was from the outgoing DG, Dr Ngozi.

A special DG appointment process was launched on October 8, 2024, at the request of the African Group and granted Members a 30-day nomination period (until November 8, 2024, three days after the 2024 US Presidential Election) to submit candidates for the post.

Last July, the African Group requested that Dr Ngozi be reappointed for a second term as soon as possible to avoid the appointment process competing with preparations for the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Cameroon in 2026.

At the time, the US remained silent on the African Group initiative. Some observers believe the real reason behind this “early” DG appointment process was put in place to avoid a potential Trump administration weighing on the process.

In 2020, then US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, who believed the WTO was China's ally in Geneva, opposed Dr Ngozi appointment as DG, preferring her opponent, Trade Minister for the Republic of Korea, Yoo Myung-Hee. Dr Ngozi had to wait until President Biden won the election to be confirmed as WTO DG.

With President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House, Dr Ngozi's reappointment is now in jeopardy as some Trump supporters already view the fast-track process as an attempt to avoid the Trump administration blocking her second bid at the helm of the organization.

Next steps

In a communication circulated on November 12, 2024, Ambassador Petter Ølberg stressed that he will convene a special formal meeting of the GC on November 28 and 29, 2024 where Members “will hear a presentation from Dr Ngozi on her vision for the WTO, followed by a question-and-answer session.” The second day of the special GC, November 29, 2024, will “provide an opportunity for Members to take a decision on the appointment of the next Director-General.”

Two things could happen then:

- 1- Either the U.S. votes for or remains silent and lets Members take the decision to reappoint Dr Ngozi as DG, which is what the WTO expects as we enter a lame duck period where it is customary for the next president not to interfere in the decisions of the sitting president.

or

- 2- The U.S. (or any other country) objects to the decision, in which case the normal appointment process would most likely take place.

The original timeframe for the DG appointment process normally starts nine months before the expiry of the outgoing DG's term, which in Dr Ngozi's case is December 1, 2024, with her current term scheduled to end on August 31, 2025. Donald Trump advisors have already criticized the WTO for trying to circumvent the next US administration by trying to grant Dr Ngozi a second term before President-elect Trump is sworn in for his second term on January 20, 2025.

If no consensus is reached on the appointment of Dr Ngozi at the November 28-29, 2024, GC, one can expect more candidates

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to emerge for the position. Observers believe that this new procedure will mean the end of Dr. Ngozi as WTO DG because her candidacy is unlikely to obtain the approval of the Trump administration.

On the other hand, if the DG appointment process is restarted according to the original timeframe, this would have an impact on the preparation of MC14, which could see its start postponed to a date later than that announced, i.e. during the first quarter of 2026.

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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