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Support for NAFTA growing, poll says

46 per cent say they favour deal

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OTTAWA – Public support for North American free trade has risen following the tentative agreement among Canada, the United States and Mexico, according to an opinion poll done for the federal government.

The survey, released yesterday, shows 46 per cent of Canadians questioned support NAFTA, while 48 per cent oppose the deal.

The survey of 1,500 people by Angus Reid Group was done Aug. 17-21, about one week after International Trade Minister Michael Wilson signed the deal with his U.S. and Mexican counterparts. The poll is said to be accurate within 2.6 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Angus Reid did a similar survey for the federal government in March and found 29 per cent support for NAFTA, compared with 67 per cent opposed.

In the March poll, public support for the existing free-trade pact with the United States was 37 per cent. In the poll released yesterday, support for the deal had risen to 45 per cent.

Federal officials say they paid close attention to opinion polling about NAFTA in the months leading up to the Aug. 12 tentative deal. Areas of particular public concern, such as protecting cultural industries from foreign influence, were made critical issues for Canadian negotiators at the bargaining table.

As well, Mr. Wilson has repeatedly argued both before and after the agreement that NAFTA will open the booming Mexican market to Canadian products.

Opinion poll results have shown that many Canadians would be swayed into supporting NAFTA if it was evident that the trade deal provides an opportunity for Canadian exporters.

Despite the low level of support for NAFTA in the March poll, 79 per cent of those surveyed felt it was important for the federal government to be at the negotiating table to protect Canadian interests. Federal officials believe this poll result is directly related to the increased support for NAFTA after the signing of the actual deal.

"A lot of those people were skeptical about what the outcome might be," said a senior federal official yesterday. "But now that they begin to see what the outcome looks like, they are probably concluding that maybe it's not so bad."

The official said the 800-page legal text of the three-way trade deal will be completed in late September but an interim document probably will be released Tuesday.

The prolonged period of legal drafting has been a result of the complexity of the issues, he said, and not because the negotiating teams are trying to win concessions on key matters.

"Frankly, the work has gone more smoothly

than I thought likely at the time we reached agreement in mid-August," said the official, who briefed reporters on condition he not be identified.

"In a technical sense, negotiations are still continuing, but it is very much a technical process. It is not a substantive negotiation. It is not reopening anything"

But a trade analyst said yesterday that more is going on than that. In areas such as government procurement, services and clothing, he said, differences exist that were papered over before last month's tentative agreement.

"The lawyers are trying to decide which formulation is best and, in doing so, are negotiating the details of the deal," he said. "The heart of the agreement is in the details. They won't change the principles, but they may change the balance and the impact!"

Since the tentative deal was signed, some analysts have expressed concern that NAFTA will be the basis of a trading bloc that favours home-grown companies, to the detriment of competitors in Asia or Europe.

Press reports have suggested the Japanese government will make clear its concerns about NAFTA at a meeting of Pacific Rim countries next week.

Japanese officials have suggested that aspects of the auto provisions may violate international trade regulations. Other Asian countries are concerned that Mexico will replace them as key suppliers of clothing and electrical products to the United States.

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