

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Dispute Settlement in the World Trade Organization: An Overview

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Summary

Dispute resolution in the World Trade Organization (WTO) is carried out under the WTO Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU), whose rules and procedures apply to virtually all WTO agreements. The DSU provides for consultations between disputing parties, panels and appeals, and possible compensation or retaliation if a defending party does not comply with an adverse WTO decision by a given date. Automatic establishment of panels, adoption of reports, and authorization of requests to retaliate, along with deadlines for various stages of the dispute process and improved multilateral surveillance and enforcement of WTO obligations, are aimed at producing a more expeditious and effective system than that which existed under the GATT. To date, 334 WTO complaints have been filed, slightly over half involving the United States either as a complaining party or defendant. Expressing dissatisfaction with WTO dispute settlement results in the trade remedy area, Congress directed the Executive Branch to address dispute settlement issues in WTO negotiations in its grant of trade promotion authority to the President in August 2002 (P.L. 107-210). WTO Members have been negotiating DSU revisions under a Doha Development Round mandate, though little concrete progress has resulted. The United States has been seeking greater transparency in dispute proceedings, and in September 2005, a WTO dispute proceeding was broadcast to the public for the first time. S. 817 (Stabenow), S. 1542 (Stabenow), and H.R. 4186 (Camp) would establish a Chief Trade Prosecutor in the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to assist the USTR in investigating and prosecuting WTO disputes. This report will be updated.

Background. From its inception, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) has provided for consultations and dispute resolution among GATT Contracting Parties, allowing a party to invoke GATT dispute articles if it believes that another's measure, whether violative of the GATT or not, has caused it trade injury. Because the GATT does not set out a dispute procedure with great specificity, GATT Parties over time developed a more detailed process including *ad hoc* panels and other practices. The procedure was perceived to have certain deficiencies, however, among them a lack of deadlines, the use of consensus decision-making (thus allowing a Party to block the

establishment of panels and adoption of panel reports), and laxity in surveillance and implementation of dispute settlement results. Congress made reform of the GATT dispute process a principal U.S. goal in the Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations.

WTO Dispute Settlement Understanding. The Uruguay Round Understanding on Rules and Procedures Governing the Settlement of Disputes (DSU), which went into effect January 1, 1995, continues past GATT dispute practice, but also contains several features aimed at strengthening the prior system.¹ A Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), consisting of representatives of all WTO Members, administers dispute proceedings. While the DSB ordinarily operates by consensus (i.e., without formal objection of any Member present), the DSU reverses past consensus practice at fundamental stages of the process. Thus, unless it decides by consensus *not* to do so, the DSB is to establish panels; adopt panel and appellate reports; and, where WTO rulings have not been implemented and if requested by a prevailing party, authorize the party to impose a retaliatory measure. The DSU also sets forth deadlines for various stages of the proceedings and improves multilateral monitoring of the implementation of adopted rulings. Given that panel reports are to be adopted automatically, WTO Members have a right to appeal a panel report on issues of law. The DSU created a standing Appellate Body to carry out this new appellate function; the Body has seven members, three of whom serve on any one case.

The DSU provides for integrated dispute settlement—that is, the same rules apply to disputes under virtually all WTO agreements unless a specific agreement provides otherwise. If a dispute reaches the retaliatory stage, this approach allows a Member to impose a countermeasure in a sector or under an agreement other than the one at issue (“cross-retaliate”). The preferred outcome of the dispute mechanism is “a solution mutually acceptable to the parties and consistent with the covered agreements”; absent such a solution, the primary objective of the process is withdrawal of a violative measure, with compensation and retaliation being avenues of last resort. The DSU has proved popular, with 334 complaints filed from January 1, 1995, to date; slightly more than half involve the United States as either a complaining party or a defendant. The United States Trade Representative (USTR) represents the United States in WTO disputes.

The DSU was scrutinized by Members pursuant to an Uruguay Round Declaration, which called for completion of a review within four years after the WTO Agreement entered into force (i.e., by January 1, 1999). Members did not agree on any DSU revisions in the initial review and are continuing to negotiate on dispute settlement issues in the current Doha Round. Discussions have addressed “remand, sequencing, post-retaliation, third-party rights, additional guidance to WTO adjudicative bodies, panel

¹ The text of the DSU, panel and Appellate Body reports, and information on the WTO dispute process is available at [http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/dispu_e.htm]. WTO disputes are listed and summarized by the WTO Secretariat in its “Update of WTO Dispute Settlement Cases,” available at the WTO website, above. A summary of U.S. dispute settlement activity is provided by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) in its “Snapshot of WTO Cases Involving the United States,” at [<http://www.ustr.gov>] (search under Trade Agreements, Monitoring and Enforcement). U.S. written submissions to WTO dispute panels are also available at the USTR website. For statistical information on cases involving the United States, see CRS Report RS21763, *WTO Dispute Settlement: Stages and Pending U.S. Activity Before the Dispute Settlement Body*, by Todd B. Tatelman. For the status of current cases in which the United States has been successfully challenged, see CRS Report RL32014, *WTO Dispute Settlement: Status of U.S. Compliance in Pending Cases*, by Jeanne J. Grimmer.

composition, time-savings, and transparency” and negotiators had aimed to intensify their work in the fall of 2005 so as to present their results at the December 2005 WTO Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong.² The United States has proposed, *inter alia*, greater Member control over the dispute settlement process as well as increased transparency, including through open meetings and timely access to submissions and final reports.³

In mid-September 2005, a WTO panel proceeding was for the first time opened for public viewing. At the request of the United States, Canada, and the European Communities (EC), the primary parties in the EC’s challenge to the U.S. and Canada’s continued imposition of retaliatory tariffs in response to the EC’s failure to comply with a WTO decision faulting its prohibition on hormone-treated beef, the panel agreed that meetings to which the disputing parties are invited to appear would be open to observation by the public through closed-circuit TV broadcast at the WTO.⁴

Steps in a WTO Dispute Proceeding

Consultations (Art. 4). If a WTO Member requests consultations with another Member under a WTO agreement, the latter must generally respond within 10 days and enter into consultations within 30 days. If the dispute is not resolved within 60 days after receipt of the request to consult, the complaining party may request a panel. The complainant may request a panel earlier if the defending Member has failed to enter into consultations or if the disputants agree that consultations have been unsuccessful.

Establishing a dispute panel (Arts. 6, 8). If a panel is requested, the DSB must establish it at the second DSB meeting at which the request appears as an agenda item, unless it decides by consensus not to do so. The panel is generally composed of 3 persons. The Secretariat proposes the names of panelists to the disputants, who may not oppose them except for “compelling reasons.” If there is no agreement on panelists within 20 days from the date the panel is established, either disputing party may request the WTO Director-General to appoint the panelists.

Panel proceedings (Arts. 12, 15). After considering written and oral arguments, the panel issues the descriptive part of its report (facts and argument) to the disputing parties. After considering any comments, the panel submits this portion along with its findings and conclusions to the disputants as an interim report. Absent further comments, the interim report is considered to be the final report and is circulated promptly to WTO Members. A panel must generally circulate its report to the disputants within six months after the panel is composed, but may take longer if needed. The period from panel establishment to circulation of the report to all Members should not exceed nine months. In practice, panels have increasingly failed to meet the six-month deadline.⁵

² Special Session of the Dispute Settlement Body; Report by the Chairman to the Trade Negotiations Committee (TN/DS/12) (July 21, 2005).

³ See, e.g., WTO document TN/DS/W/79 (July 13, 2005) and TN/DS/W/82 (October 24, 2005).

⁴ See WTO documents WT/DS320/8 and WT/DS321/8 (August 2, 2005); and WTO, “Registration Begins for Public Hearings of ‘Continued Suspension of Obligations in the EC—Hormones Dispute’ panels 12-15 September 2005 in Geneva,” at [<http://www.wto.org>].

⁵ See European Commission, “DSB Special Session: Non-paper on Panel Composition,” (continued...)

Adoption of Panel Reports/appellate Review (Arts. 16, 17, 20). Within 60 days after a panel report is circulated to WTO Members, the report is to be adopted at a DSB meeting unless a disputing party appeals the report or the DSB decides by consensus not to adopt it. Within 60 days of being notified of an appeal (extendable to 90 days), the Appellate Body (AB) must issue a report that upholds, reverses, or modifies the panel report. An appellate report is to be adopted by the DSB, and unconditionally accepted by the disputing parties, unless the DSB decides by consensus not to adopt it within 30 days after circulation to Members. The period of time from the date the panel is established to the date the DSB considers the panel report for adoption is not to exceed nine months (12 months where the report is appealed) unless otherwise agreed by the disputing parties.

Implementation of Panel and Appellate Body Reports (Art. 21). Thirty days after the panel and any AB reports are adopted, the Member must inform the DSB how it will implement the WTO ruling. If it is “impracticable” to comply immediately, the Member will have a “reasonable period of time” to do so. The period will be: (1) that proposed by the Member and approved by the DSB; (2) absent approval, the period mutually agreed by the disputing parties within 45 days after the date of adoption of the report or reports; or (3) failing agreement, the period determined by binding arbitration. Arbitration is to be completed within 90 days after the reports are adopted. To aid the arbitrator in determining a compliance period, the DSU provides a non-binding guideline of 15 months from the date of adoption; awards have ranged from six months to 15 months, one week. The DSU envisions a time period of no more than 18 months from the date a panel is established until the reasonable period of time is established. Where there is disagreement as to whether a Member has complied in a case, a panel may be convened to resolve the dispute (Article 21.5); the compliance panel has 90 days to issue its report, which may be appealed.

Compensation and Suspension of Concessions (Art. 22). If defending party fails to comply with the WTO recommendations and rulings within the compliance period, the party must, upon request, enter into negotiations with the prevailing party on a compensation agreement within 20 days after the expiration of this period; if negotiations fail, the prevailing party may request authorization from the DSB to retaliate. If requested, the DSB is to grant the authorization within 30 days after the compliance period expires unless it decides by consensus not to do so. The defending Member may request arbitration on the level of retaliation or whether the prevailing Member has followed DSU rules in formulating a proposal for cross-retaliation; the arbitration is to be completed within 60 days after the compliance period expires. Once a retaliatory measure is imposed, it may remain in effect only until the violative measure is removed or the disputing parties otherwise resolve the dispute.

Compliance Issues. While many WTO rulings have been satisfactorily implemented, a number of difficult cases have tested the implementation articles of the DSU, highlighting some deficiencies in the system and prompting suggestions for reform.⁶ For example, gaps in the DSU have resulted in the problem of “sequencing,” an

⁵ (...continued)

December 9, 2003, Ref. 575/03, at 5, at [<http://trade-info.cec.eu.int/doclib/html/115445.htm>].

⁶ Some of these issues are discussed in CRS Report RL31860, *U.S.-European Union Disputes in the World Trade Organization*, by Raymond J. Ahearn and Jeanne J. Grimmett.

issue that first manifested itself during the compliance phase of the U.S.-EC dispute over the EC's banana import regime. Article 22 of the DSU allows a prevailing party to request authorization to retaliate within 30 days after a compliance period ends if the defending party has not complied. Article 21.5 provides that disagreements over the adequacy of compliance measures are to be decided using WTO dispute procedures, "including whenever possible resort to the original panel"; the compliance panel's report is due within 90 days and may be appealed. The DSU does not integrate Article 21.5 into Article 22 processes, nor does it expressly state how compliance is to be determined so that a prevailing party may pursue action under Article 22.

Sequencing has been discussed but not resolved in the current WTO dispute settlement negotiations. Multilateral action is needed to revise WTO rules in this area given the January 2001 adoption of an Appellate Body report that in effect concluded that a panel convened to arbitrate the level of trade retaliation under Article 22.6 does not have a mandate to first decide if a WTO Member is in compliance with WTO rulings, and stated that rules regarding sequencing must be decided by WTO Members as a whole (*United States—Import Measures on Certain Products from the European Communities*, WT/DS165). In the meantime, disputing parties have been entering into bilateral agreements regarding the sequencing of compliance panels and requests to retaliate in specific proceedings.

WTO Dispute Settlement and U.S. Law. Adoption of panel and appellate reports finding that a U.S. measure violates a WTO agreement does not give the reports direct legal effect in this country. Thus, federal law would not be affected until Congress or the Executive Branch, as the case may be, changed the law or administrative measure at issue.⁷ Procedures for Executive Branch compliance with adverse WTO decisions are set out in §§ 123 and 129 of the Uruguay Round Agreements Act (URAA). The DSU generally applies to disputes involving state and local measures covered by WTO agreements and Members are obligated to ensure compliance at this level (DSU, Art. 22.9 and n.17). Only the federal government may bring suit against a state or locality to declare its law invalid because of inconsistency with a WTO agreement; private remedies based on WTO obligations are also precluded by statute (URAA, § 102(b),(c)).

Sections 301-310 of the Trade Act of 1974 provide a means for private parties to petition the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to take action regarding harmful foreign trade practices. If the USTR decides to initiate an investigation, whether by petition or on its own accord, regarding an allegedly WTO-inconsistent measure, he or she must invoke the WTO dispute process to seek resolution of the problem. The USTR may impose retaliatory measures to remedy an uncorrected foreign practice, some of which may involve suspending a WTO obligation (e.g., a tariff increase in excess of negotiated rates). The USTR may terminate a Section 301 case if the dispute is settled, but under §

⁷ See Uruguay Round Agreements Act (URAA) Statement of Administrative Action, H.Doc. 103-316, vol. 1, at 1032-33. Implementing legislation states that "[n]o provision of any of the Uruguay Round Agreements, nor the application of any such provision to any person or circumstance, that is inconsistent with any law of the United States shall have effect." URAA, § 102(a)(1); see also H.Rept. 103-826, Pt. I, at 25. Note that federal courts have held that WTO reports are not binding on the judiciary. For example, *Corus Staal BV v. Department of Commerce*, 395 F.3d 1343 (Fed. Cir. 2005). See generally CRS Report RS22154, *WTO Decisions and Their Effect in U.S. Law*, by Jeanne J. Grimmer.

306 must monitor foreign compliance and may take further retaliatory action if compliance measures are found to be unsatisfactory. A “carousel” provision added to § 306 in P.L. 106-200 directs the USTR periodically to revise the list of imports subject to Section 301 retaliation unless the USTR determines that implementation of WTO obligations is imminent or the USTR and the Section 301 petitioner agree that revision is unnecessary.

Article 23 of the DSU requires WTO Members to use DSU procedures in disputes involving WTO agreements and to act in accord with the DSU when determining if a violation has occurred, determining a compliance period, and taking any retaliatory action. Section 301 may be generally be used consistently with the DSU, though some U.S. trading partners continued to complain that the statute allows unilateral action and forces negotiations through its threat of sanctions. The EC challenged Section 301 in the WTO in 1998, with the dispute panel finding that the language of § 304, which requires a USTR determination as to the legality of a foreign practice by a given date, is *prima facie* inconsistent with Article 23 because in some cases it mandates a determination and statutorily reserves the right for the determination to be one of inconsistency with WTO obligations before the exhaustion of DSU procedures. The panel also found, however, that the serious threat of violative determinations and consequently the *prima facie* inconsistency was removed because of U.S. undertakings, as set forth in the Uruguay Round Statement of Administrative Action (H.Doc. 103-316) and made before the panel, that the USTR would use its statutory discretion to implement Section 301 in conformity with WTO obligations. Moreover, the panel could not find that the DSU was violated by § 306, which directs USTR to make a determination as to imposing retaliatory measures by a given date, given differing good faith interpretations of the “sequencing” ambiguities in the DSU. See *United States—Sections 301-310 of the Trade Act of 1974; Report of the Panel* (WT/DS152/R) (adopted January 2000). The EC has also challenged the “carousel” statute described above, but the case remains in consultations (WT/DS200). The issue has also been raised in Doha Round dispute settlement negotiations.

Recent Legislation Related to WTO Dispute Settlement. In its grant of trade promotion authority to the President in August 2002 (P.L. 107-210), Congress directed the Executive Branch to address dispute settlement issues in WTO negotiations, particularly to seek the adherence of panels to previously-agreed standards of review, and provisions encouraging the early identification and settlement of disputes.

Three 109th Congress bills—S. 817 (Stabenow), S. 1542 (Stabenow), and H.R. 4186 (Camp)—would create a Chief Trade Prosecutor in the Office of the USTR. Each bill would make the principal function of the new position, which would be subject to Senate confirmation, “to ensure that United States trading partners comply with trade agreements to which the United States is a party” and would direct the Prosecutor, among other things, “to assist the United States Trade Representative in investigating and prosecuting disputes before the World Trade Organization, and pursuant to other trade agreements to which the United States is a party.” To date, no action has been taken on any of the three bills.