

**TPP deal to be signed off in New Zealand next month**  
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The mammoth Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) will be formally signed in New Zealand next month, marking the end of negotiations on the agreement, officials in Wellington said Thursday.

TPP aims to create the world's biggest free-trade area, bringing together 12 Pacific Rim countries including the United States, Japan and Australia.

Work on the deal began in earnest in 2008 and New Zealand Trade Minister Todd McClay said the document would finally be signed in Auckland on February 4.

"(The signing ceremony) will mark the end of the TPP negotiating process," he said.

"Following signature, all 12 countries will be able to begin their respective domestic ratification processes and will have up to two years to complete that before the agreement enters into force."

The entire deal must be ratified as agreed, without changes, which could tie the hands of governments and legislators.

US President Barack Obama has described the deal as a foundation for "21st century trade".

However, critics have vowed to fight ratification, saying it threatens labour rights, environmental protection and access to affordable medicines.

TPP nations – which also include Canada, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam – account for about 40% of the global economy. – AFP, January 21, 2016.

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