

At the same time, Belgium's transportation system is one of the best in Europe. The country is easily accessible by air, sea, rail and inland motorways. Zaventem International Airport in Brussels is one of the few in Europe that does not currently face problems of passenger or cargo congestion, and at the present time is also undergoing a large expansion programme. The ports of Antwerp and Zeebrugge are among the most efficient in the EC, for both bulk and container cargo. Moreover, Belgium, situated on or close to a number of the EC's major highways, provides easy access to major markets over its borders. Finally, Belgium is characterized by numerous export oriented medium-sized companies occupying niche markets, which help to make it an important source of potential strategic partners, and particularly well-adapted to work with Canadian firms both in the EC and in the North American Free Trade (NAFTA) markets.

With respect to the fish and seafood market, Belgium's geographical location and the behaviour of its consumers combine to make it an excellent test market for these products. Although located on the North Sea, Belgium has a scant 66 km of coastline, and therefore is unable to satisfy total domestic demand for fish and seafood, even with the fishing rights it possesses in English coastal waters. At the same time, new opportunities are opening up to exporters trying to penetrate the Belgian market, due to an increasing interest on the part of several large food chains to purchase directly from foreign sources, as opposed to relying on importers.

From the exporter's point of view, the Belgian market is also attractive since entering it gives him ready access to the principal economic region of the EC. Due to its ideal location, Belgium also functions as a transit country for a considerable amount of imported seafood. This seafood is quite often processed (smoked or marinated) under duty-free regimes and re-exported to neighbouring countries. At the same time, foreign purchasing managers from Germany, France and the Netherlands are regular buyers at Belgian importers and fresh fish ports, in large part because of the wide variety.

The behaviour of the Belgian fish consumer is another reason for foreign firms to attempt to penetrate the Belgian market first. Belgians are major fish consumers, with per capita annual consumption, including fish oils and fish meals, of some 15 kilos. Even narrowing this down to actual fish and seafood consumption, Belgians still consume some 8.5 kilos of fish per year. Added to this voracious consumption is the fact that the Belgian consumer has traditionally shown his readiness to consume a large variety of fish. While in the past there had been a preference for fresh fish caught in Belgian vessels, more recently frozen fish from all parts of the world has increased their market share.