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Flaherty reins in banks on insurance

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Finance Minister Jim Flaherty has asked Canada's banks to stop advertising insurance on their websites, and informed them the federal government will soon bring in new rules compelling them to do so.

In a letter to the country's biggest banks on Wednesday, Flaherty said, "It has come to my attention that some banks are using their websites to undertake insurance activities."

"As you know, the business of insurance is not permitted in a bank branch, other than for some limited activities, as laid out in the Bank Act and supporting regulations," Flaherty noted in the letter, which was also sent to the Canadian Bankers Association and the Trust Companies Association of Canada.

The letter stated the government plans to bring in new policy measures "at the earliest opportunity" that will bring websites under the same regulatory regime that applies to bank branches.

"Some of the banks . . . are in the insurance business, and that's fine, that's their separate business," Flaherty told reporters Wednesday.

"The policy concern has always been mixing the insurance business and the banking business in the same location, and that's what we're trying to avoid. It's been avoided since the early 1990s. Now, with technology advances, it's a bit more challenging, so we're addressing that issue."

In a strongly worded reply, the Canadian Bankers Association argued that Flaherty's decision would limit consumer access to insurance products.

"We are completely shocked that Mr. Flaherty would want to limit how and where consumers can access information about insurance," spokesperson Andrew Addison said in an e-mail. "Further, Mr. Flaherty has taken this step without any public consultations with Canadians or the banking industry."

The bankers' association pointed to a ruling last June on the matter by a federal industry watchdog. In the ruling, the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions concluded that, under Canadian law, a website does not qualify as a bank branch, and thus Canadian banks are free to promote any insurance products online.