

A global approach to Customs improvements

The Australian Customs Service is a leading proponent of international customs cooperation throughout the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. This report outlines Customs work at a variety of levels in various forums which include international trade facilitation on their agendas.

Two such bodies are the World Customs Organization (WCO) headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, and the APEC forum, headquartered in Singapore. Customs seeks to influence emerging customs processes by taking a leadership role in the WCO and APEC and by building strong regional and bilateral relationships with other customs administrations. The role of coordinating and representing Australia's efforts in these forums is the responsibility of the International Section in Canberra.

Customs serves on the WCO Policy Commission and has played a key role in developing strategies to reform individual WCO committees. Australian Customs continues to be a major contributor to the work being done on developing non-preferential Rules of Origin and revising the Kyoto Convention on harmonising and simplifying customs procedures around the world.

Australia is a member of the Far East, South and South East Asia, Australasia and the Pacific Islands Region of the WCO and is the Regional Representative from 1998 through 2000. Australian Customs took on the role as WCO Regional Representative in an effort to further improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the WCO and to continue a leadership role in the international customs community. During this period, Australian Customs has been instrumental in the formation of an Integrity Working Party to develop strategies for regional members to implement the WCO Arusha Declaration concerning integrity in Customs. The Arusha Declaration addresses the need for integrity in customs noting that customs is an essential instrument for

the effective management of an economy through combating smuggling and facilitating legitimate trade. Australian Customs hosted an Integrity Workshop in Brisbane in August 1999 with representatives from 15 Asia-Pacific customs administrations in attendance.

The complexities of contemporary international trading and globalisation are challenging customs administrations to facilitate legitimate trade while still protecting the community. Customs agencies play an integral role in international trading and commerce through management of border controls. They also must deal with increasing illegal trade in drugs, firearms, chemical pre-cursors for both drugs and weapons as well as many other forms of smuggling. These criminal activities have an enormous cost to governments and communities through human suffering as well as significant losses of revenue.

Hand in hand with these roles is a need for Customs to balance control and facilitation responsibilities through sensible application. Techniques, such as risk management, support cargo and passenger profiling using objective selection methods, thereby reducing interruptions to the legitimate movement of goods and people.

This activity is paramount to enhancing the global trading environment as it helps reduce the costs of business by simplifying and harmonising customs rules and processes and supports mechanisms for sharing experiences and information. Australian Customs is emerging as a leader in development of risk management techniques and advance passenger information.

Customs is promoting these and other international best practice programs throughout the region. This will ensure maintenance of high standards in customs techniques and services and thus reduce trading costs to international business.

Australian Customs is prominent in meetings and work programs of the APEC Sub-Committee on Customs Procedures (SCCP). We have a leading role in collective action plan initiatives and we provide, and coordinate, technical assistance to enable other customs administrations to meet their APEC obligations. Australian Customs is overseer for the introduction of the UN/EDIFACT electronic messaging standard, which is used by traders to lodge entries with Customs. We also oversee well risk management initiatives and coordinated and hosted technical assistance visits and training workshops.

Australian Customs chaired two working groups within the SCCP in 1997-98. One group examined ways to increase business sector involvement in SCCP activities. The working group prepared a paper, subsequently endorsed by the APEC Committee on Trade and Investment, on the management of financial contributions from the business sector. The other group is examining customs aspects of electronic commerce to contribute to the broader APEC e-commerce program.

Australian Customs remains committed to active participation in the Oceania Customs Organisation

(OCO), formerly known as the Customs Heads of Administration Regional Meeting (CHARM). OCO meets once each year on a rotating basis among its membership and this year's meeting took place in Niue in August (See New Oceania customs group formed, page 19). Australian Customs work with these customs organisations includes a period as chair of the sub-committees dealing with integrity in customs and with curbing the flow of weapons in the Pacific.

Australian Customs continues to develop strong bilateral relationships with other customs administrations, particularly those in the Asia-Pacific region. These efforts are in line with Australian Government's broader international strategies and complements multilateral activities.

Australian Customs conducts significant bilateral customs talks with Hong Kong, China; Indonesia; Japan; Korea; New Zealand and Papua New Guinea on an annual or biennial basis. A Framework for Cooperation and Assistance was exchanged with Revenue Canada in June 1998 building upon a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1987. Further, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with UK HM Customs & Excise in June 1999.

Australian Customs continues to provide expert technical assistance to customs administrations throughout the Asia-Pacific region. This cooperation, addressing a wide range of techniques and skills, enables

Australian Customs to assess regional needs and to provide appropriate customs and management training. These activities are provided either directly to a requesting administration or on a commercial basis, thus limiting the impact upon Australian Customs resources.

The annual Customs International Executive Management Program (CIEMP), held in Canberra is one initiative which targets senior managers in regional Customs administrations. CIEMP is designed to further improve management and customs skills as well as promoting informal networking, communication and cooperation.

Australian Customs' international activities are multi-purpose and multi-faceted. They focus on the needs of regional customs administrations as well as pursuing issues of interest to Australian Customs and the Australian Government. These cooperative endeavours improve the quality and reliability of inter-regional customs facilities thus maintaining the high standard of service delivery to Australian and other communities. As part of its commitment to international customs cooperation, Australian Customs officers participate in a wide range of technical and management training programs, ensuring our expertise is further enhanced through international exposure.