

## Australia embraces e-commerce

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Along with a number of other APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation) economies, Australia has adopted a goal of trying to reduce paper documents for customs and other cross-border trade administrations by 2005.

The deadline for the other economies within APEC is 2010.

Electronic commerce (or "e-commerce") is one of the most high profile and important aspects of today's information economy. E-commerce is any form of business transaction in which interactions take place electronically rather than by using paper, physical exchange or contact. It is rapidly becoming the "norm" for doing business.

APEC recognised the need for a concentrated approach to issues arising out of the use and adoption of new technologies. All APEC economies have committed themselves to the goal of "paperless trading".

APEC's Sub-Committee on Customs Procedures (SCCP) has focused on a program to design and deliver, to its member economies, technical assistance, practical advice and support. This will assist APEC economies to evaluate, develop and implement paperless trading processes. In the SCCP, Australia co-ordinates this activity.

The first step of this project was to circulate a "paperless trading" questionnaire and matrix among APEC members. The questionnaire is designed to gather information and to "bench-mark" current practices. The questionnaire and matrix were distributed in August.

The SCCP has adopted a staged approach that promotes "self-help" among APEC members, rather than relying on outside technical assistance. This approach recognises the diversity of the economies within APEC, as well as respecting the variety of needs and priorities within the region. However, when needed, a range of technical experts can be made available.

In the APEC region (and indeed within the whole global economy), maximum economic and social benefits from the use of e-commerce will only be achieved if all economies are involved in its development and experienced in its use.

To maximise the benefits of e-commerce within APEC, each economy in the region will need to look to other international initiatives and ensure consistent policies are followed. In particular, the balance between government regulation and private sector self-regulation is important. In this aspect especially, the business sector will have a vital role to play.

For e-commerce to work successfully, access to information and infrastructure must be assured. In addition, users and consumers must be able to trust both the information systems and the integrity of electronic transactions. Regulatory uncertainty in the new electronic environment needs to be minimised and logistical problems for payments and deliveries need to be addressed if e-commerce is to provide any real benefit.

APEC will hold a symposium on electronic commerce in China in

2001. The conference will examine progress to date and discuss practical solutions to achieve APEC's "paperless trading" goals by the deadlines previously adopted.

Along with other customs administrations, the Australian Customs Service has a responsibility to facilitate the movement of goods and people across international borders while meeting the Government's statutory requirements. The increasing use of e-commerce has already greatly changed customs processes all around the world. This can be seen in the development of customs automation, the greater use of electronic messages and the Internet.

The benefits of paperless trading were recognised by APEC Trade Ministers at their June 2000 meeting in Darwin. The APEC Sub-Committee on Customs Procedures is focused on a program to design and deliver technical assistance, practical advice and support - where needed. This will assist other APEC economies to evaluate, develop and implement their e-commerce processes.