

**International Customs Day 2009**  
**“Customs and the environment: protecting our natural heritage”**

WCO Headquarters, Brussels, 26 January 2009

*Opening address by Kunio Mikuriya, WCO Secretary General*

Distinguished guests, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you for joining me to celebrate International Customs Day with the theme “Customs and the environment: protecting our natural heritage” which has become a common responsibility for mankind and customs needs to be part of this worldwide effort.

The growing illegal trade in environmentally sensitive goods has prompted the global community to adopt international and regional Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) with trade provisions to protect the environment. Starting from the CITES Convention on endangered species in 1975, the number of these trade-related MEAs have grown steadily over the years: the Montreal Protocol on ozone depleting substances in 1989; the Basel Convention on hazardous wastes in 1992; and the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997, to name but a few.

Naturally customs plays an essential role to ensure that the cross-border movement of goods complies with these international agreements. Consequently, many customs administrations are faced with a huge challenge, namely a lack of awareness and basic information for frontline officers, which requires training for customs officers on how to recognize and respond to illegal shipments of environmentally sensitive goods. Another common challenge is the lack of communication and cooperation between customs and the other competent authorities which could assist customs with the identification of suspect items, with the verification of documents, and with the handling of seized live animals, plants and hazardous items. At the same time, collaboration between customs authorities in exporting countries and those in importing countries is also

critical to enforce trade control at both ends of this operation.

The international customs community has, through the WCO, developed several measures to address these challenges. Since the early 1990s the WCO has adopted several Recommendations, encouraging its Members to take effective action to enhance control on MEAs related to trade and to combat illicit traffic. We have also mobilized our traditional tool – the Harmonized System (HS) – and amended its tariff headings for live animals, meat, skins, and ozone depleting substances to help customs identify and monitor the most traded commodities covered by MEAs. The next version of the WCO Data Model will incorporate data on hazardous wastes to enable customs and other responsible agencies to identify and monitor their trans-border movement in a single window environment. Moreover, training material on CITES is now available on the WCO e-learning platform.

Since the environment issue requires cooperation with other competent authorities, the WCO took a further step to strengthen its partnership approach by joining the Green Customs Initiative (GCI) in 2001. The GCI contains a series of collaborative activities by partner organizations, including UNEP, CITES and other MEA Secretariats, aimed at raising the awareness of customs officers to trade-related environment issues. Under this framework, our partner organizations have jointly organized workshops, prepared training material, and provided a platform for co-operation on enforcement issues.

On the operational side, the WCO Regional Intelligence Liaison Office (RILO) network, in particular the RILOs for Western Europe and for the Asia/Pacific have been very active in collecting and analyzing seizure information on environmentally sensitive commodities. In this connection, the Sky-Hole Patching Project – a unique name – was launched between 2006 and 2007 by the Asia/Pacific RILO and the UNEP regional office in Thailand. The project kept track of suspicious shipments of ozone depleting substances and hazardous wastes. It involved 20 customs administrations and resulted in significant seizures. It has now become a daily monitoring and notification system.

In order to raise awareness, the WCO Secretariat coordinated a global one day intensive control operation on 15 January 2009, targeting illegal trafficking of endangered species protected by the CITES Convention, with the participation of more than 90 WCO Members and the 11 WCO RILOs. More than 10000 customs officers worldwide, with the support of their national counterparts from CITES management authorities, reinforced their controls on selected seaports, airports, and land boundaries. All participating customs services were connected to the WCO Customs Enforcement Network communication system (known as CENCOMM) which is a secure real-time communication system to share information and report seizures. This operation has resulted in more than 90 seizure reports from 25 members with 3416 pieces, 618 boxes, and 596 kg of articles, covering as many as 80 kinds of endangered species, ranging from ivory tusks, musk, tiger derivatives, rhinoceros horns and lynx through to snow lotus, lion skins and caviar.

In a similar vein, we will carry out another operation in collaboration with the Basel Convention Secretariat, targeting illegal trafficking of hazardous and other waste, involving national customs and environmental agencies from at least 55 countries in Europe, Asia, the Pacific and Africa later this year.

These operations show the capability and potential of WCO Members to act as a global network, one of the pillars of the “Customs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. In the future, customs will be able to act collectively, based on more consistent risk management and shared intelligence. They also illustrate the need to coordinate with other competent authorities to ensure that customs responds to the concern of citizens and achieves the national objective of sustainable economic development.

We are currently experiencing a severe economic downturn at a global level following the credit crunch in 2008. This economic crisis could offer both an opportunity and a challenge to environment protection, depending on the perception and behavior of industry and citizens. However, by acting together, the customs community can provide a good

example of what can be done to help protect our natural heritage for future generations.

My best wishes to all as we celebrate International Customs Day 2009.

Thank you for your attention