

21 January 2009

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for inviting me to the celebrations of the International Customs Day in Hungary. I am unfortunately unable to join this year to celebrate this event with you, but I would nevertheless like to share a few thoughts with you.

It is internationally recognised that the illegal trade in "environmentally sensitive" commodities is a worldwide problem with serious global consequences. Given that environmental protection is an important pillar of sustainable development, I welcome the initiative of the World Customs Organisation to dedicate its 2009 International Customs Day on 26 January 2009 to the theme "Customs and the Environment: Protecting our natural heritage". This will provide Customs administrations worldwide with an ideal opportunity to highlight the role they play in protecting our environment.

The European Union attaches high priority to the protection of the environment. It is engaged in a number of multilateral environmental agreements and has developed an impressive set of Community legislation in this area.

For example, since 1975 the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) restricts the trade in plants and animals which are threatened with extinction. From the very start, the customs administrations in the European Union were involved in the enforcement of these rules which have been transposed into Community law.

Unsustainable economic growth and globalised trade are also endangering biodiversity worldwide. The Convention on Biodiversity of 1993 and the Biosafety Protocol of 2003 address these issues and form a basis for future control tasks for customs.

On the basis of a Community action plan on Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT), the European Union has adopted legislation which will restrict the import of timber from countries that undertake to work together with the European Union in protecting forests from illegal logging. Customs will control the trade flows of timber coming from partner countries.

Since 1987, the Montreal Protocol foresees the phasing out of almost all substances that deplete the ozone layer. By enforcing the rules of this protocol, customs provide an important contribution towards the protection of the ozone layer.

Customs also control the trade in chemical substances. This ensures that chemicals imported into the European Union meet the same high safety standards as applied to chemicals produced in the European Union. Controls on exports are also carried out to make sure that only chemicals that are accepted in the respective countries of destination can leave the European Union. In fact, the European Community is a Contracting Party to the Convention on a Prior Informed Consent Procedure for certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade, which has been transposed into Community legislation and has to be implemented by Member states authorities, including customs.

Controls in all these areas, which are just a few examples, require a specific scientific expertise as well as the sharing of knowledge. Therefore co-operation between the competent authorities is crucial for achieving best results. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage you to further develop co-operation between customs administrations across the EU and also with customs in third countries, and to permanently improve your performance in this respect. By creating a partnership between administrations monitoring various stages of the supply chain, between administrations and businesses, by developing EU policies and promoting dialogue and best practices at international level, we will create "win-win" situations ensuring on the one hand the protection of our environment and of our health, and on the other hand the necessary facilitation of trade.

In this regard, let me emphasise the crucial role the European Customs Union has been playing over the past 40 years, by ensuring that up to 27 customs services work as one through EU cooperation programmes and state-of-the-art information systems.

Finally, I would like to thank the Hungarian Customs administration and colleagues from all other national customs administrations for their commitment to protect our natural heritage. The European Commission appreciates the efforts undertaken in this area that are complementary to all other customs tasks relating to the protection of the citizens of Europe. Our children will be grateful for your hard work.

Yours sincerely,