



HARMONIZED SYSTEM
COMMITTEE

NC0358E1

-
27th Session

O. Eng.

Brussels, 23 April 2001.

USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TO SPEED UP DECISIONS BY THE HSC
(Item III.3 on Agenda)

Reference documents :

NC0340E2, Annex C/4 (HSC/26 – Report)
NC0313E1 (HSC/26)

I. BACKGROUND

1. At the 26th Session, the Director of Tariff and Trade Affairs informed the Committee about the possible streamlining of working methods through the better use of available information technology.
2. The Committee, while being asked to submit suggestions for expediting the work of the Committee and the Secretariat, took note of the working document and the information provided by the Director.

II. SECRETARIAT COMMENTS

3. On 10 January 2001, the Secretariat sent a circular letter (01NL0012 - Wi/FI) to all Contracting Parties, inviting them to submit any suggestions or comments in respect of the use of the Internet to speed up the HS Committee's decision-making processes.
4. In response the Secretariat received, on 9 February 2001, a note from the Moroccan Customs Administration supporting the Secretariat's view in this respect, with the restriction, however, that the information exchanged via the WCO Web site should have an informal character.

File No. 2822

Possible use of the Internet

5. The Secretariat is of the view that the exchange of information via the Internet may, under certain conditions, reduce the work of the Secretariat and that of the Committee, thus possibly speeding-up the HSC decision-making process. Among the options which could be used, the following should be considered :
- (i) virtual classification discussion forum;
 - (ii) virtual meetings;
 - (iii) publication of classification advice given by the Secretariat to Customs administrations;
 - (iv) accessibility to HS documents;
 - (v) availability of the Explanatory Notes and the HS Commodity Data Base via the Internet; and
 - (vi) submission of comments.

Virtual classification discussion forum

6. In the area of the Harmonized System, the Secretariat has recently opened two discussion forums on the Members Web site, one for Nomenclature issues and one for Scientific Sub-Committee issues (see also Item II.7 on the Agenda). The use of these forums should facilitate the exchange of information between interested administrations with respect to particular HS-related issues, e.g., classification questions.
7. Although intended as an instrument having an informal character, the Secretariat believes that the Nomenclature discussion forum could certainly assist Members in finding solutions with respect to classification questions.
8. At the same time, Members may also wish to use the discussion forum as a way of exchanging views vis-à-vis certain issues on the Committee's agenda, thus avoiding long discussions during the session and the need to postpone discussions to the next session.
9. In addition, the Secretariat believes that this forum could be used to undertake the work of the Committee's Working Party. Whereas at the moment draft amendments to the Explanatory Notes and the Compendium of Classification Opinions are often sent to the Working Party for consideration and finalization, the Secretariat considers that such drafts could easily be made available via the Internet with a view to having them considered by interested parties.
10. If the Committee could agree to the idea of using the discussion forum on the Members Web site to prepare amendments to the Explanatory Notes and the Compendium of Classification Opinions, the Secretariat would suggest the following procedure :
- Each item on the Committee's agenda which is referred to the Working Party, will receive its own separate forum topic.
 - The Working Party's Chairman will serve as the facilitator for each of these forum topics.

- As soon as the document at issue has been published on the Web site, a forum topic will be opened for that Agenda item.
- The facilitator will set deadlines for receiving observations, and will send the agreed texts to the Secretariat, which will subsequently prepare a brief, written report containing the agreed texts.
- This report, which will contain the results (i.e., the texts of the proposed amendments) and, in the case of lack of consensus, the positions of the various participants (as is the case with the current Working Party's report), will be presented to the Committee by the facilitator (Chairman).
- Since the forum is open in both official languages (i.e., English and French), the Secretariat will provide a translation of proposed amendments, but not of the comments made by the participants.
- The Secretariat will send these translations by e-mail to the facilitator, who will subsequently publish them under the appropriate discussion forum topic.
- Discussions on these forum topics will start as soon as the relevant working documents are available and should be concluded one or two working days (Brussels time) before the Committee's session starts.

If the Committee agrees, the Secretariat would suggest using this procedure for the Working Party at the next session.

Virtual meetings

11. The Secretariat believes that Contracting Parties should give some consideration to holding virtual meetings via the Internet. First, it would open up the possibility of holding meetings more frequently (e.g., during the interval between two "regular" sessions), thus possibly speeding-up discussions and, consequently, decisions. Such meetings could encompass one particular issue or a number of issues. Second, virtual meetings would also reduce costs for both participants (e.g., travel costs) and the Secretariat (e.g., meeting costs).
12. There would, of course, be some disadvantages, such as the non-availability of the necessary hardware or facilities, or even the connection to the Internet, in some Member administrations. Second, problems might occur with respect to simultaneous interpretation from French to English and vice versa. In this context, it should be borne in mind that Spanish and Russian might also be used (as working languages) in the future. Third, there might be a problem of timing, given the time differences between Brussels and other parts of the world.
13. That having been said, the Secretariat is of the view that virtual meetings are potentially an excellent way to cut down on some of the Committee's time-consuming activities, such as the consideration of some of the more complicated classification issues. Informal meetings could be organized, for example, for Contracting Parties involved in a particular classification dispute and for other interested parties. Clearly, given the informal character of such meetings, they would need their own set of procedures. The outcome of such meetings could be reported to the Committee for final decision.

Classification advice

14. Members will shortly be able to consult the Secretariat's correspondence with Customs administrations concerning the classification of particular commodities on the Members Web site (see also Item II.7 on the Agenda). Keywords or HS code numbers can be used to assist Members in finding classification information on specific commodities.
15. The Secretariat believes that this type of information may help to solve classification questions Members are faced with, thus reducing the possible number of questions before the Committee or the Secretariat.

Accessibility to HS documents

16. The Secretariat is also making all HS-related documents which exist in electronic format available on the Members Web site (see also Item II.7 on the Agenda). This will allow users to find background material in respect of the development of the HS, and of decisions taken by the Committee, thus avoiding possible overlaps between potential classification requests and classification issues dealt with by the Committee previously.

Availability of the Explanatory Notes and the HS Commodity Data Base via the Internet

17. The HS Explanatory Notes and the HS Commodity Data Base are now available (via subscription) on the WCO's public Web site (see also Item II.7 on the Agenda). This feature allows administrations and the public alike to consult and search two important classification supporting instruments on-line.

Submission of comments

18. Delays in the publication of documents sometimes hinder discussions in the Committee, in particular when Members consider that the late arrival of a document does not permit full discussion. The time needed for the preparation of documents by the Secretariat could certainly be cut down if submissions could be received in electronic format, for example, by e-mail in addition to receiving them through the "normal" way (i.e., by post or by fax). A more timely publication of documents could then be achieved.

III. CONCLUSION

19. The Committee is invited to give its views on the issues referred to above, taking into account the comments of the Secretariat in paragraphs 3 to 18 above. It is also invited to decide :
 - (i) whether or not the work of the Working Party could be undertaken through the use of the discussion forum on the Members Web site, and, if so, to indicate when this experiment should start, and
 - (ii) whether the Secretariat should explore the use of virtual meetings in greater detail.
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