

P: ASTM International
FR0439@ustr.eop.gov

[FR Doc. 04-18716]

Public Dialogue on Enhancing the Transatlantic Economic Relationship

ASTM International is the largest and one of the oldest U.S. domiciled international standards developing organizations. ASTM International facilitates the development of technical standards for about 90 industrial sectors including steel, copper, plastics, building construction, roads, petroleum, textiles, adhesives, medical devices, sports equipment, air quality, water quality, consumer product safety, nuclear energy, industrial chemicals, etc. About 30,000 individual technical experts from 118 countries participate in the drafting of ASTM International standards.

ASTM International welcomes the opportunity to provide our comments on current standards-related challenges in the U.S. – European Union (EU) transatlantic economic partnership. We are focusing our comments on the issue of technical assistance because it is a subject that has global significance; and because it directly affects the members of ASTM International and the use of ASTM standards.

The rules of the WTO Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement require those countries that have more to help those who have less by offering them technical assistance. Technical assistance is not limited to, but includes, advice on the preparation of technical regulations (standards) and the development of standardization skills. Trade capacity building programs and development policies are the plans by which governments meet this obligation.

In the U.S., both the private and public sector provide technical assistance to countries in the areas of voluntary standards, conformity assessment, and technical regulations. However, such technical assistance is decentralized and difficult to quantify. There is limited data available regarding the extent of U.S. technical assistance, no centralized location to view all U.S. programs, or no accurate accounting of such efforts.

Clearly, the commitment to technical assistance by the EU is unmatched in its coordination and magnitude. In a report submitted to the World Trade Organization, the EU has outlined its plan for technical assistance to developing countries. In it, the European Commission has notified the WTO that it (and individual member states) has allocated funds to “help developing countries understand the European Community’s system.” The breadth of their commitment is significant. There are 23 technical assistance projects planned in Africa, three in the Caribbean, 20 in Latin America, 29 in Asia, 18 in the Mediterranean and Middle East States, 20 in the Commonwealth of Independent States, and 69 in southeast Europe. In all, the report documents 182 EU funded technical assistance projects around the world.

The EU's well-coordinated and significant commitment is tantamount to implanting ideas, or standards, in developing countries by way of education, training, and workshops. It is fair to say that European government and industries believe that they can create a competitive advantage in world markets by strongly influencing the content of international standards. Over time, that will have the effect of creating a preference for European products rather than U.S products.

ASTM International believes that there is a great thirst in the world for good standards. The line that runs through standards to trade, to jobs, to development, to technology transfer is straight. There are people in these countries that see that line of trade and development running through ASTM standards and others not yet aware of the opportunity. They need to know what is in them and how to use them. ASTM International has committed many resources to send staff and technical experts to all parts of the world, conducting workshops/training, responding to requests from the U.S. government to provide standards information to developing countries, and taking part in standards in trade workshops and commercial law development programs. We have found that in some countries, government policies prohibit the use of de facto international standards. That is a challenge that U.S. domiciled international standards developing organizations such as ASTM International have been facing for some time. And now, added to that challenge is technical assistance, which has evolved into the mass marketing by governments of selected standards to selected markets at the exclusion of U.S. commercial opportunity and growth.

In conclusion, ASTM International believes that there is a critical need for the U.S. federal government to invest more resources in technical assistance and to coordinate a national effort to help developing countries understand that they have a choice in the standards marketplace. The best standards in the world should not have any barriers to their use. Accordingly, ASTM International looks forward to working more closely with the U.S. administration in the development and implementation of positions on technical and standards policy issues at the international level.

ASTM International
Contact: Jeff Grove
1828 L Street, NW, Suite 906
Washington, DC. 20036
(202)223-8505