

## **WTO-IICA Reference Centre Twenty most frequently asked questions**

The purpose of this note, prepared by the Centre for Strategic Analysis for Agriculture (CAESPA) at the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA)<sup>1</sup> is to share the 20 Most Frequently Asked Questions asked about the WTO Reference Centre at IICA headquarters.

### **1. What is the World Trade Organization (WTO)?**

The WTO was created in 1995. It is an organization that establishes the rules and regulations (agreements) that govern trade among countries<sup>2</sup>.

The objective of the WTO is to assist producers of goods and services, exporters and importers improve their participation in world trade.

### **2. Who establishes trade rules and regulations among the different countries?**

The rules and regulations that govern world trade are defined unanimously by all WTO member countries.

Currently, the WTO has 159 Member Countries<sup>3</sup>. The governments of these

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<sup>1</sup> This material was prepared in April 2013 by Adriana Campos Azofeifa, Specialist in Trade Policies and Negotiations and Coordinator of the WTO-IICA RC, and Nadia Monge Hernández, Assistant of the WTO-IICA RC.

<sup>2</sup> The official WTO website is: [www.wto.org](http://www.wto.org)

<sup>3</sup> As at March 2, 2013.

countries, through their trade ministers or ambassadors, jointly agree to establish the policies that will regulate the exchange of goods and services.

### **3. Who does the WTO belong to and what is its role?**

The WTO belongs to the countries that comprise it (Member Countries). Its main role is to ensure that trade flows as smoothly, predictably and freely as possible. Member Countries sign agreements seeking to reduce trade barriers and help producers of goods and services, exporters and importers to conduct their business. They do so because they are convinced that free trade is vital to achieving greater social, economic and environmental objectives.

### **4. What is a WTO Reference Centre?**

A WTO Reference Centre (RC) is a unit established by the WTO, in cooperation with one or various strategic partners, with the objective of providing information about the WTO. The WTO Reference Centres promote the distribution of WTO publications and news, share their databases and provide information about available online training courses. The Centres were established as a technical cooperation program intended to attenuate any problems associated with access to information in this area and provide insight into topics relevant to the WTO, as has been observed in some developing countries. There are, currently, 120 WTO Reference Centres throughout the world.

**5. How are IICA and the WTO related? Why does IICA have a WTO Reference Centre?**

IICA and WTO are intergovernmental organizations. Both share common interests, especially technical cooperation for development and technical cooperation for international trade in agrifood products. IICA is the organization of the Inter-American System that provides technical cooperation in agriculture and rural well-being; the WTO, on the other hand, provides technical cooperation for trade through its Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC) IICA has been an Observer Member of the WTO Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures for the past 10 years and of the WTO Committee on Agriculture for the past 2 years. Both institutions have developed joint activities such as workshops, seminars, forums and training courses in topics of common interest such as, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, international trade regulations, trade negotiations, agricultural notifications, intellectual property and trade policies

**6. Is the WTO Reference Centre at IICA, therefore, intended only for Government use?**

No, any person interested in topics related to international trade in agricultural products and services may access the WTO Reference Centre at IICA. In order to ensure better customer service, users are required to schedule an appointment beforehand.

**7. Where is the WTO-IICA RC located?**

The WTO Reference center is located at IICA headquarters in Coronado, San José, Costa Rica, specifically within the Venezuela Library. Its business hours are Monday through Friday, 8a.m. to 5p.m. Appointments are required.

If you are in a foreign country or remote area, you can submit your questions by e-mail, or contact us by telephone or Skype during business hours.

**8. What services are provided by the WTO-IICA Reference Centre?**

The Centre facilitates the exchange of information and provides training in topics concerning international trade.

The WTO-IICA RC specializes in areas of agricultural trade affecting the 34 Latin American and Caribbean countries that comprise the Institute by providing services that include:

- Customized guidance with regard to WTO and international agricultural trade topics.
- Possibility of accessing physical WTO publications and videos at the Centre. The Centre will also e-mail the electronic version.
- Capacity to perform specialized searches on trade databases, specifically, WTO databases.
- Information sessions and video conferences.
- Market profiles (trade flows, tariffs).
- Provides assistance for preparation of educational material on international agricultural trade within the WTO and IICA frameworks.
- Information alerts about noteworthy publications, news or events.
- Bulletins on WTO topics of interest.
- The Centre works closely with libraries specializing in international agricultural trade and agricultural research, such as the Venezuela Library at IICA Headquarters and the Orton Memorial Library at the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE).

## **9. What types of publications are produced by the WTO?**

The WTO publishes brochures, books, research documents and manuals, both in printed and electronic format. The topics are varied, ranging from legal matters (legal texts on subscribed agreements, status of trade disputes, etc.), statistics; information brochures detailing the function of the organization, reports on trends in international trade, tariff profiles and research on topics that cover a broad range of subjects such as the environment and its relationship with medical technology, health and trade.

## **10. Does the WTO-IICA RC maintain all WTO publications? Are they sold or free of charge?**

Since the WTO-IICA RC specializes in agriculture, it receives WTO publications related to the agrifood sector; however, the RC can assist users in accessing publications in other fields. Printed versions must, generally, be purchased and requested directly from the WTO, but users can consult many printed and electronic versions directly at the Centre. Only electronic versions can be distributed free of charge, provided that the WTO has made them available to the public and users commit to using them for personal and non-profit purposes.

You can request any WTO publication from us by e-mail which we will send it to you free of charge.

## **11. I entered the WTO website which already has a vast amount of information. Why is the Reference Centre necessary?**

The Reference Centre employs experts in WTO issues and the different databases of the organization. In addition, since they are

also part of the IICA team, they can also access information from IICA's databases. Therefore, they can help you to find the exact information that you require, which will save you time. If you also prefer, they can guide you so that you can find and download the WTO or IICA data that you need. In addition, the close relationship of the Centre with specialists in food security, rural development, climate change, agriculture technology and agribusiness, among others, as well as other sources of the WTO and IICA, can complement the scope of your questions and ensure that they are answered correctly.

## **12. Is the Reference Centre a part of the United Nations Organization (UN)?**

The WTO is an independent body and does not belong to the UN or to any other international entity. However, it works very closely with the UN and its agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Environment (UNEP), among others. It also works closely with international organizations, bodies and agencies such as IICA, the World Customs Organization (WCO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Trade Development Facility (STDF), among others.

## **13. Does the WTO publish tariffs on products?**

Yes. There is a special data base for checking tariff rates by tariff line/group (products) and by country. Access is open to the public. You can also request this information from the WTO-IICA Reference Center.

**14. Is the tariff information included in the Free Trade Agreements (FTA)?**

The Reference Center can provide the tariff information that the countries submit to the WTO or to other official sources. The Center can find the information or refer users to sources other than the WTO and IICA, where they can obtain the information.

**15. How do companies benefit from the information provided by the WTO?**

Companies are the backbone of trade and the WTO exists because of them. Moreover, the presence of trade standards and obligations renders the dynamics of trade in goods and services more transparent and predictable. For this reason, the private sector benefits most from the existence of these regulations. The countries are important partners of the Governments and the WTO and participate actively in formulating standards and procedures in international trade.

By knowing the type of information that the WTO and the Reference Centers provide, the companies have more and better instruments for developing more efficient and effective trade processes.

**16. Can you come to my company to explain what the WTO is and how it is can be of service to us? How much would it cost?**

Yes. For this, you would need to address a formal letter to IICA requesting the service and, depending on the case, this can be done virtually (by videoconference) or face-to-face. IICA provides the service free of cost; however, and again, based on the particular case, the requesting companies may be asked to cover the logistical costs of the service.

**17. Is it true that the Reference Center gives courses on the WTO at universities?**

No. The Reference Center does not give courses in universities. However, it does provide support to educational institutions that may request it, in the form of talks or lectures on the WTO or on any other topic regarding international trade in products and services related to agriculture.

**18. ¿Do you offer courses on the WTO at IICA?**

Once per year, IICA and the WTO organize a course on specific topics in international trade at an IICA location. This course is given by experts at both institutions. Additional courses may be offered in response to the needs and requests of both institutions.

Routinely, the WTO offers online courses for various levels and on different topics. The cost varies according to the type of course. In order to access these courses, we recommend that you contact the Reference Center or consult the WTO Website directly.

**19. ¿What are the online courses offered by the WTO and how do I register?**

There are two types of online courses: 1) courses guided by a WTO expert, at the end of which a certificate is awarded, and 2) self-taught courses, with no certification.

The first type of course exclusively targets public servants or intergovernmental organizations, and are subject to a selection process by the Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC) of the WTO, which provides a username and a password for participation in the course.

In the second case, you sign up for the course you wish to take, download the content and decide on your rate of progress. There are general courses such as "Introduction to the WTO", and specialized courses such as "Agriculture and the WTO", "Sanitary and phytosanitary measures", "Technical barriers to trade", among others. If you are seeking a particular course, you can contact the Centre and we will provide you with the necessary guidance.

## **20. Do you only work with trade information from the WTO?**

The WTO-IICA Reference Center (CR OMC-IICA) operates within the Center for Strategic Analysis for Agriculture (CAESPA). Whereas the Reference Center specializes in WTO topics, the CAESPA conducts research and training and prepares information bulletins on international agricultural trade topics related to the areas of activity of the Institute.

This allows the Centre to considerably expand the information that it has available. For example, the following links contain a bulletin on Trade agreements in Latin America in 2012, several bulletins on meetings of the Agriculture Committee of the WTO, and bulletins on topics relating to education and training in the WTO.

<http://www.iica.int/Esp/Programas/AnalisisEstrategico/Paginas/NormativaComercial.aspx>

<http://www.iica.int/Esp/Programas/AnalisisEstrategico/Paginas/CentroReferenciaOMCIICA.aspx>

For more information, contact the WTO Reference Center at IICA directly, either by telephone (506) 2216-0170 and (506)2216-0358 or by electronic mail at [centroreferencia.omc@iica.int](mailto:centroreferencia.omc@iica.int).