

FROM CHAIRMAN GORDON

Since becoming Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee, I have focused a great deal of attention on our country's competitive position in the world and ensuring that we work to build our economy for the future through sustained commitments to research and development and a well educated workforce. Whether the America COMPETES Act, the National Nanotechnology Initiative, or any number of energy research bills, the Committee has continued to focus on the future and keep each of our economic sectors strong. And, though we have accomplished much, through the more than 140 hearings the committee has held over the past three years I have listened carefully to discussions about the use of standards, the need for standards harmonization, and most importantly the problems presented by matters related to acceptance international standards and the importance of these standards to your company.

Standards provide a bridge between research and technology commercialization. They provide agreed-upon consensus industry specifications for products, services and systems, reducing costs and enabling commerce and trade; they support protection of health, safety and the environment; and enable interoperability of different technologies. They enable the development of complex systems by defining interfaces between networked elements. As any business can understand, the lack of availability of standards leads to inefficiencies and increased costs, extends the time to market, and slows the market penetration of new technologies. As you know, many of our economic competitors select and impose their chosen standards at our disadvantage. In summary, standards are critically important to the broad deployment of new technologies in the market and international acceptance of these standards is critical to growth in U.S. exports.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology is the national measurement institute for the United States, and has a significant responsibility in the U.S. standards system. The National Technology Transfer and Advancement Act (NTTAA), charges NIST with coordinating federal government agencies' use of standards developed in the private sector standards organizations to achieve greater reliance on voluntary standards and reduce dependence on government-unique standards.

In examining these issues, I have concluded that it may now be time to closely examine our country's policies regarding the development and acceptance of standards and the impact of the current standards development process on our country's ability to remain competitive in the global marketplace. I believe the convergence of technologies should be mirrored by a convergence of international standards governance. The definition of what is considered an international standards body is different around the world. There are a few instances in which there is agreement. The Agreement on Sanitary and Phyto-sanitary Measures of the World Trade Organization (WTO-SPS), explicitly names three standards developing organizations as developers of international standards for the purposes of the agreement. These are the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). However, the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (WTO-TBT) does not identify any standards developers as international standards developers. This creates a complicated web which is difficult to navigate, especially since our country relies so heavily on our own industry-consensus system.

But before the committee moves forward with this effort, I want to get your thoughts.

1. How important are technical standards to companies like yours?
2. Do you think a comprehensive review of our standards-setting process is timely and worthwhile?
3. With the globalization of technology development and business, is it time to assess an international standards system developed 50 years ago?

4. As you know, the administration's recent 60-day cybersecurity review recommends a single point in the federal government to coordinate our government's position on international cyber standards. Should the Committee examine this issue, a single federal coordinating point, for all technical standards areas?

I would appreciate your thoughts to any or all of these questions. Please contact Lori Pepper, lori.pepper@mail.house.gov, on the Committee staff to share your ideas and offer your input.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Bart Gordon
Chairman
Committee on Science and Technology