Multilateral Environmental Agreements & World Trade

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In September 2003, the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (“WTO”) will meet in Cancun, Mexico. Cancun may provide an opportunity to reconcile many tensions between trade and the environment, although it seems likely that environmental concerns will remain marginalized. NGOs, governments, and other environmental agencies are eagerly waiting to see what happens at Cancun.

At the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha, Qatar, governments mandated the WTO to unilaterally clarify the relationship between trade rules and trade measures that enforce MEAs. The Doha mandate, however, established that the outcome of any negotiations “shall not diminish the rights and obligations of Members under existing WTO agreements,” thus continuing to subjugate environmental concerns to those of trade.

Many developing nations favor prioritizing economic development over complying with MEAs. They consider GATT Article XX, the list of exceptions, adequate for handling the MEA-WTO issue. Other nations, mainly developed economic powers, support clarifying the MEA-WTO relationship.

Two areas of potential progress are increased cooperation and information exchange, and laying out the legal framework for the relationship between MEAs and trade agreements. A major limiting factor, however, is the fact that the negotiations leading up to Cancun have largely excluded many environmental perspectives from the discussion. Currently the WTOs Committee on Trade and Environment meets with secretariats of MEAs once or twice a year to discuss trade-related provisions and dispute resolution mechanisms in MEAs.

Thus, new negotiations could expand the existing cooperation between the WTO and trade-related MEAs.

(Endnotes)


3 Doha Round Briefing Series, supra note 1.
