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Coming Together in North America for the Environment and the Economy

*by Sheila Copps*¹

I am delighted to have this opportunity to contribute to NAFTA: Law and Business Review of the Americas. Canadians care about their economic relationship with Mexico and the United States. We see NAFTA as a great opportunity for growth and exchange. We also see it as an opportunity to work closely together to protect the environment and make sustainable development a reality in each of our countries.

Last month, in Oaxaca, Mexico, at the annual meeting of the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, our countries maintained the vigorous pace of linking trade and the environment and taking measures to counter environmental risk with coordinated environmental responses.

We continued to assert and to prove that this commission, charged with making sure that we move from principles and proposals to action and implementation, has an important role to play in the North American Free Trade Agreement's eventual expansion. We also challenge resistance to forward-looking environmental action.

In Oaxaca, we agreed to trilateral action on PCB's and other toxics. We agreed to set up a North American pollutant release inventory to help us take a continent-wide approach to managing chemicals.

We agreed to step up efforts to share environmental technologies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions; to set out principles for cross-border environmental impact assessments; to combine our efforts on habitat protection; and to set up rules permitting individual citizens, in any of our countries, to file formal complaints that environmental laws are not being enforced.

By using these approaches and providing these tools, the Commission demonstrates that North American environmental solutions bring about economic health and sustainable development for all of our citizens. We are demonstrating the wisdom of fashioning future free trade in the Americas into green trade in the Americas.

This is crucial leadership. As trade around the world liberalizes, and as barriers to investment and the flow of goods fall, there needs to be a certainty that progress made on the economic side is consistent with progress on the environmental side.

We need to make sure that trade policies do not contribute to environmental degradation or restrict legitimate environmental action.

The Rio Conference of 1992 helped galvanize this concept. It set out to fundamentally change the way we think and deal with the global environment and the global economy.

There has been an increasing recognition of sustainable development as an overarching policy objective ever since. Today, many international sustainable development mechanisms are in place. Each reflect the growing reality that no country is immune

1. Sheila Copps was the former Minister of the Environment, Environment Canada.

from environmental problems, and that no country can address them alone. Each reflect the opinion that the import and export of good ideas is needed to make sustainable development possible.

The Montreal Protocol on Ozone Depleting Substances establishes a timetable for the reduction and elimination of specific ozone-depleting substances. Because of the protocol, ozone depletion is slowing and we will soon start reversing the damage. Business has also adapted, even prospered, in the drive to find ozone-friendly technologies.

The Climate Change Convention requires developed countries to take action to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions at 1990 levels by the end of the decade and work for reductions thereafter. Thanks to the convention, parties are now beginning a process for action in the post-2000 era. We are seeing the emergence of technologies that drive us toward our stabilization and reduction targets and that drive new and expanding trade opportunities.

In addition, the Convention on Biological Diversity commits signatories to the conservation of biodiversity and to taking the kind of economic measures necessary to make it happen.

On the trade agreement front, the environment, while not a major factor in the Uruguay Round of the GATT, was considered when the World Trade Organization was put together. But NAFTA goes further. Oaxaca proved this.

We have made environmental cooperation, enforcement of regulations and capacity building key elements of the North American Free Trade Agreement. We have set up a tri-lateral advisory body called the Joint Public Advisory Committee to make sure that public participation is an integral part of the evolution of this institution.

In many ways, the work Canada, the United States and Mexico are doing is a model for other countries.

During an environmental business mission to Asia two months ago, I was struck by how colleagues in Japan, South Korea, Thailand and Malaysia regard the Commission. They see it as proof that countries can work in harmony on environmental issues. They see it as proof that there can be real confluence between environmental, trade and economic initiatives.

They see the Commission as an enviable reflection of what the entire world needs to do: respond to the universal notion that for sustainable development to be an attainable goal domestically, there must be commitment internationally to integrate economic and environmental thinking.

Canadians, Americans and Mexicans should be proud that together we are out in front. I urge readers of NAFTA: Law and Business Review of the Americas to keep participating in this exercise and to engage themselves in the efforts that lie ahead to improve the quality of life for the citizens and species on the continent we share.