

Oceania crosses the Pacific



Oceania
Customs Organisation

Australian Customs has handed over the reins of the Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO) secretariat to New Caledonia after hosting it in Brisbane for three years.

John Marks, head of the secretariat and a Customs Director with nearly 35 years experience, ran the secretariat since it opened in November 1999.

"As agreed by members in 1999, the life of the secretariat in Brisbane was limited to three years, expiring at the end of 2002," John said. "Following the OCO Annual Conference of Customs Heads in 2001, we began a process to identify a new home and funding source for the secretariat and, very pleasingly, that process attracted strong interest from OCO members.

"The decision was made that New Caledonia would host the secretariat in Noumea for three years and for the Fiji Islands Customs Service to then take over for another three years from late 2005.

"It is important to note that funding for the secretariat while in Noumea will not be coming from France but from the New Caledonian Government which, under the Noumea Accord, now has responsibility for regional affairs."

The new head of the secretariat will be Marc Jannier, a French Customs official with over 25 years experience. Mr Jannier is coming from the position of Deputy Regional Director of Customs in New Caledonia. Before the handover he visited the secretariat in Brisbane to work with staff on finalising plans for a smooth handover.

"The OCO's mission is to promote efficiency and effectiveness in all aspects of Customs administration in the Oceania region, with particular

emphasis on the needs of developing administrations," said John Marks. "The focus is on harmonisation, cooperation and assistance between members.

"We work to ensure members' interests and concerns are projected effectively to governments, non-government organisations and the private sector."

In support of this mission, John and the staff of the secretariat have coordinated tasks identified in a strategic plan developed at the OCO Annual Conference of Customs Heads. This year's conference was held in the French Pacific territory of Wallis and Futuna in April.

Shashi Prasad, from the Fiji Islands Customs Service, and Tau Malietoa, from the Samoa Customs Department, have worked with John since the beginning of 2000.

Both were seconded by their administrations to work in the secretariat as research officers. Shashi has focused his attention mainly on trade facilitation, revenue collection and human resource development issues, including integrity. Tau has focused more on law-enforcement and communication issues, including the OCO website at www.ocosec.org

Both have found their time working on regional customs affairs to be quite different from their work at home and very helpful in broadening their understanding of a wide range of customs issues.

"The OCO has 23 member administrations stretching as far north as the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and as far east as French Polynesia," said John.

"Australian Customs is by far the largest member while, at the smaller

end of the scale, members include Niue, with a staff of six Customs officers, and Norfolk Island, with eight."

Other members of the OCO include the Customs administrations of the Fiji Islands, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the French Pacific territories and the many other small countries of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

"The OCO works very closely with other regional bodies," said John. "With the growth in people smuggling and growing numbers of asylum seekers, the secretariat initiated dialogue with key members of the Pacific Immigration Directors Conference, which is a similar body to the OCO, on strengthening the coordination of immigration issues in the Pacific region.

"With the willing support of Australian Customs, since January 2002 the Directors' Conference secretariat has been co-located with the OCO secretariat in Brisbane, a situation that has proved to be helpful to both bodies."

The OCO is involved in a range of other cooperative efforts with organisations such as the World Customs Organization, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in Suva and the South Pacific Chiefs of Police Conference.

"The OCO signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation with the WCO in April this year, opening the door to a range of benefits for OCO members unlikely to ever join the WCO," said John.

"The secretariat is working closely with the Forum secretariat and the chiefs of police on model illicit drug legislation for use in the Pacific, action commended by Forum leaders in their communiqué following a meeting in Fiji in August 2002.

"In recent times, other cooperative efforts have been directed towards terrorism, model weapons-control legislation, integrity, intelligence exchange, ozone-depleting substances and cultural-heritage issues."

After tying up the loose ends in Brisbane, John took up a position with

Australian Customs as Regional Director Northern Territory in early 2003. Shashi Prasad returned to work in the Fiji Islands Customs Service in late 2002. Tau Malietoa provides continuity in the secretariat by moving to Noumea for 18 months.

Australian Customs will continue to work as an active member of the OCO and looks forward to its continued success following the relocation.



John Marks presenting the OCO Charter to Marc Jannier, the incoming Head of Secretariat at the opening ceremony of the Noumea OCO Secretariat on 25 November 2002.