

The WTO's Three Sisters (Codex Alimentarius, IPPC and OIE) and International Standards for Food and Agriculture

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Food and agricultural standards are essential to efficient global food trade. Standards about quality characteristics, safety, process and labeling are important for judging conformity and authenticity at each step along the chain from production, through processing to commercial exchanges. Traditionally the standards for the growth and processing of food have involved cultural notions steeped in anthropology and sociology, carrying national values and culture. Internationally harmonized food standards lessen the subjectivity and international differences that can be barriers when a product enters the international marketplace. Recently, science, business, law, and government regulation are consequential considerations in the development of food and agricultural standards. The rules of the World Trade Organization often are the foundation for these current standards for plants, animals and food and the push for harmonization. Today the WTO's SPS Agreement about food safety with its reference to the "Three Sisters" and the TBT Agreement for other non-tariff barriers to trade are the reference points for international, regional and national rules, decisions, guidelines and recommendations. The Three Sisters are the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the World Organization for Animal Health and the international and regional organizations operating within the framework of the International Plant Protection Convention. Recent regional free trade agreements like NAFTA2, CETA and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) draw on the WTO idea of standards harmonization but illustrate evolution in the rules. National authorities adopt standards based on the WTO rules but also are evolving, as evidenced by the current US Food and Drug Administration's proposed strategic modernization of standards. The culture of food will remain a challenge to standards harmonization, but the evolving regional rules will continue to rein in standards that pose barriers to trade..