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Electronic Forum and Information System for Monitoring the Multilateral Agricultural Negotiations

The Electronic Forum is a specialized mechanism for communication and articulation created and administered by IICA's Area of Policies and Trade, of the Technical Consortium. It was set up to serve the network of agricultural negotiators of the countries of the hemisphere and their support teams, and to facilitate the exchange of information among IICA's network of trade and trade negotiations specialists.

The idea for this mechanism arose in October 1998 when IICA and FAO founded the Informal Consultative Group of Agricultural Negotiators of the Countries of the Americas (ICGAN), made up of the agricultural negotiators representing their countries at the meetings of the Negotiating Group on Agriculture of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and at the meetings of the Committee on Agriculture of the World Trade Organization (WTO). At that time, the group entrusted IICA and FAO with serving as the joint technical secretariat and requested that they set up an permanent electronic mechanism of articulation in this area.

The ICGAN has become a cooperative network for dialogue and the exchange of technical information. It meets periodically, concurrently with the meetings of the FTAA Negotiating Group on Agriculture, to address its own agenda. By August 2000, it will have met a total of eight times to discuss the principal issues stemming from the agricultural trade negotiations.

An electronic forum specializing in agricultural trade and agricultural negotiations was created, which can be accessed with any Internet browser program (i.e., Explorer, Netscape) at the following electronic address: <http://Infoagro.net/Comercio>. Information therein is classified according to different security levels: public information, which can be viewed by anyone who enters the system; and private information, which is exclusively for the use of agricultural negotiators and trade specialists at IICA and FAO. Access to the latter is limited to users who have been assigned personal codes by the system administrator.

The web site has four components: a. News, which posts summaries of important news on trade and trade negotiations published by the media; b. Electronic forum, which is a mechanism for dialogue, the exchange of information and articulation among users that includes ongoing dialogues, real-time virtual meetings, users' directory, calendar of events, etc.; c. Virtual file, which stores digital files and data bases of specialized information, as well as publications, bibliographic references, teaching materials and statistical indicators; d. Links, provides referrals and access to information published by specialized trade organizations on their own web sites and enables users to easily locate information on trade, especially as pertains agricultural trade and related issues.

Information for monitoring agricultural negotiations is disseminated through the web site and e-mail lists. Subscriptions can be requested at the following electronic address: administrador@infoagronet.

The principal users of the electronic forum are agricultural negotiators and members of their support teams, officials from international organizations, specialists from the academic sector and civil society, and trade specialists at IICA and FAO. Access has also been accorded to individuals or private sector trade associations, such as the Latin American Dairy Federation (FEDPALE) and CNAA of Costa Rica.

Regarding the performance of the Electronic Forum, between June 1999 and May 2000, more than 51,000 hits were registered (only 12,500 in May 2000), with the average duration of the

visit being 12 to 15 minutes. The network has more than 200 subscribers, including 130 agricultural negotiators from throughout the hemisphere, 47 users, and 10 organizations that disseminate entering information on a daily basis, including ALADI, RNM/CARICOM, FEDENAGA of Venezuela, CNAA of Costa Rica, and IICA and FAO specialists.

The goals for the year 2000 is to achieve more than 150,000 hits on the web site and to incorporate more members from the academic sector, researchers and representatives of the private agricultural sector so as to enrich discussions and bring private trade associations and agricultural negotiators closer together.

The forum has enabled IICA's Area of Policies and Trade to strengthen the network of agricultural negotiators from the countries of the hemisphere and their specialists, among others, promoting dialogue and the exchange of information and creating a pool of readily accessible specialized information. In this way it contributes effectively to fulfilling the institutional mandates contained in Resolution 333 of the Ninth Regular Meeting of the Inter-American Board of Agriculture (IABA) "Support to Trade Negotiations within the Framework of the FTAA and the WTO" (Santiago, Chile 1997), Resolution 348 of the Tenth Meeting of the IABA "Third Ministerial Forum" (Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, October 1999), and IICA's 1998-2002 Medium Term Plan.