

› COPANT Focuses on Trade Facilitation while Debating IEC's Master Plan

The Pan American Standards Council (COPANT) held its annual general assembly in April in Guayaquil, Ecuador. César Díaz Guevara, executive director of the Ecuadorian Service Standards (INEN), welcomed the 80 delegates and attendees, including European, Australian, and first-time, large Japanese contingents. Mr. Díaz acknowledged a solemnity that permeated the meeting because of a major earthquake that had struck in Ecuador's coastal town of Pedernales just days before. COPANT President Joe Bhatia, president and CEO of ANSI, followed Mr. Díaz's welcome with a moment of silence.

With 34 member countries, six European supporting members, and a memorandum of understanding with IEC, ISO, CEN, CENELEC, the Pacific Area Standards Council, and other entities, COPANT is active in the development and adoption of standards throughout the Americas, particularly for developing countries.

The COPANT general assembly provides its members with an overview of international, regional, and local efforts concerning standards and conformity assessment to foster international trade through briefings by IEC, ISO, CEN/CENELEC, CANENA, and other organizations. It also reports on emerging global developments such as systems approach, environmental stewardship, social responsibility, codes and standards, conformity assessment and product acceptance, intellectual property, and the impact of these developments.

James E. Matthews III, IEC vice president and former USNC president, introduced a discussion of the IEC master plan, which evoked a spirited discourse.

Developing countries, in taking steps to climb the economic ladder, have bought into the value of participating in the IEC's standards activities, even



Presiding over the COPANT general assembly were (from left) Osvaldo Petroni, COPANT treasurer; César Díaz Guevara, INEN executive director; Joe Bhatia, COPANT president; and Ricardo Rodríguez Fragoso, COPANT vice president. Photo by Joel Solis

if their electrotechnical industries are small contributors to overall GDP. The result is a regional—and almost exclusive—preference for IEC standards as the basis for national adoption. Even so, most delegates strongly believe that their countries are not important to the IEC, based on what they consider to be exorbitant annual membership fees that are necessary to participate in the IEC's conformity assessment systems.

They want to maintain their IEC-affiliated membership status indefinitely. This would allow access to IEC standards, which would support a fledgling industrial sector. It would also allow continued participation, adoption, and promotion of IEC standards in return for lowering costly barriers to exports. The general idea is to have an IEC Affiliated Country Plus program that would grant access to the IEC testing databases for a minimal fee.

There was also a regional call for countries to move toward truly international standards. The U.S. is often faulted for adhering to principles set out by the World Trade Organization's Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement. It spells out six principles for determining whether a standard is

international: openness, transparency, impartiality and consensus, relevance and effectiveness, coherence, and the development dimension.

Under these principles, standards bodies designated as international would include standard developers residing outside of Geneva, including IEEE, ASTM, ASME, NFPA, and ASHRE. The delegates' concern is that the fast pace of innovation and a lack of collaboration results in a dearth of standards and conformity assessment coherence.

Delegates were also concerned with the IEC marketing itself as “the home of industry.” Delegates asked the IEC to broaden its marketing tagline to address the concerns of countries that have a responsibility to their citizenry to be unbiased when setting national requirements for safety, health, environment, and consumer protection.

Finally, members asked that the IEC develop materials and webinars on the benefits of conformity assessment systems. ☺

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