13 October 2026

IFCBAA Submission – RCEP General Review

Executive Summary

The International Forwarders & Customs Brokers Association of Australia (IFCBAA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the RCEP General Review. Drawing on the practical experience of customs brokers and freight forwarders supporting Australian importers and exporters, this submission focuses on measures that could make RCEP easier to understand, use and administer.

IFCBAA recognises the value of RCEP in supporting regional supply chains, particularly through its regional rules of origin and accumulation provisions. However, where businesses can choose between RCEP and an existing bilateral free trade agreement, the preferred agreement will often depend on more than the tariff rate alone. The availability of supporting origin information, the capacity of the exporter or producer to substantiate the claim, and the documentary requirements of the importing country can all influence which agreement is used.

The submission makes three recommendations: simplify rules of origin and improve practical RCEP utilisation; accelerate paperless trade and interoperable digital documentation, including MLETR-aligned frameworks; and improve the accessibility of FTA information and support for small and medium enterprises. Together, these measures would help businesses make informed choices and reduce avoidable administrative costs without compromising origin compliance.

Recommendation 1 – Simplify Rules of Origin and Improve RCEP Utilisation

Feedback received by IFCBAA suggests that where trade occurs directly between Australia and a single RCEP trading partner, businesses may choose to utilise an existing bilateral free trade agreement where it provides an equivalent or more straightforward pathway to preferential treatment.

RCEP's value becomes more apparent where regional supply chains involve multiple RCEP Parties and businesses are able to utilise the Agreement's regional rules of origin and accumulation provisions.

However, these more complex supply chains can also create additional challenges in establishing and demonstrating originating status. Businesses and their customs brokers may need to obtain and retain evidence relating to materials and production processes across several jurisdictions. Accessing sufficient origin information from overseas suppliers can be particularly challenging.

International Forwarders & Customs Brokers Association of Australia Ltd - ABN 92 287 746 091
P: 02 9587 1986 E: ifcbaano@ifcbaa.com W: www.ifcbaa.com
7C/2-4 Northumberland Rd Caringbah NSW 2229

In practice, the choice of free trade agreement is not always determined by the importer alone. Although the importer generally makes the preferential tariff claim in the country of importation, the exporter or producer is often best placed to establish originating status and provide the relevant Certificate of Origin, declaration of origin or other supporting evidence, as permitted by the agreement. An exporter may therefore have considerable practical influence over which agreement can be used, particularly where it is only able or willing to substantiate origin under a particular FTA. Equally, an importer may specifically request that an exporter provide documentation under RCEP or another available agreement where that arrangement better suits the transaction. These differing perspectives are relevant both to Australian exporters supplying overseas customers and to Australian importers sourcing goods from RCEP Parties.

IFCBAA recommends that the General Review examine whether the practical operation of RCEP's rules of origin can be simplified without compromising the integrity of preferential arrangements.

In particular, RCEP Parties should consider:

- simplifying the evidence required to establish originating status where supply chains involve multiple RCEP Parties
- providing clearer and more practical guidance on the operation of accumulation provisions
- improving consistency between Parties in the interpretation and administration of rules of origin
- improving access to information required to substantiate origin
- expanding electronic exchange and verification of origin information
- examining practical barriers that may result in businesses seeking preferential treatment retrospectively rather than claiming RCEP preference at the time goods are imported

Improving these processes would help businesses make greater use of one of RCEP's principal advantages – its ability to support integrated regional supply chains across multiple member economies.

International Forwarders & Customs Brokers Association of Australia Ltd - ABN 92 287 746 091
P: 02 9587 1986 E: ifcbaano@ifcbaa.com W: www.ifcbaa.com
7C/2-4 Northumberland Rd Caringbah NSW 2229

Recommendation 2 – Accelerate Paperless Trade, Digital Trade Documentation and MLETR Adoption

IFCBAA encourages RCEP Parties to use the General Review to accelerate the transition from paper-based trade processes to genuinely digital and interoperable trade systems. Despite significant advances in digital trade, international supply chains continue to rely on a mixture of electronic and paper-based processes, manual document verification and differing documentary requirements between jurisdictions. For customs brokers, freight forwarders, importers and exporters, these differences increase administrative costs, create duplication and can delay the movement and clearance of goods.

Digitalisation is particularly relevant to the practical utilisation of RCEP's regional rules of origin. If regional accumulation is one of RCEP's key advantages, the Agreement should make it easier for the origin information underpinning that accumulation to move electronically between suppliers, traders, intermediaries and customs administrations.

Where a product incorporates materials or production processes from several RCEP Parties, establishing originating status may require information to be obtained from multiple businesses and jurisdictions. The ability to exchange, authenticate and verify this information electronically could reduce the administrative burden associated with demonstrating origin and make RCEP's accumulation provisions more accessible in practice.

This should extend beyond the electronic reproduction of existing paper documents. RCEP should progressively support an environment in which trusted trade data can be created once, authenticated, exchanged and reused securely throughout the regional supply chain.

An important part of this transition is the wider adoption of the UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records (MLETR). MLETR provides a legal framework under which electronic transferable records can perform the functions traditionally undertaken by paper instruments such as bills of lading, bills of exchange, promissory notes and warehouse receipts. UNCITRAL describes electronic transferable records as a fundamental component of a paperless trade environment.

Within RCEP, Singapore provides an important model, having enacted MLETR-based legislation in 2021. China has also taken significant legislative action, with UNCITRAL recording legislation enacted in 2025 that is influenced by MLETR and its underlying principles, although presently limited to bills of lading.

Australia has an opportunity to take a leadership role within RCEP, working particularly with Singapore, to encourage wider adoption of MLETR-aligned legal frameworks and greater interoperability of electronic trade documentation across the region.

International Forwarders & Customs Brokers Association of Australia Ltd - ABN 92 287 746 091
P: 02 9587 1986 E: ifcbaano@ifcbaa.com W: www.ifcbaa.com
7C/2-4 Northumberland Rd Caringbah NSW 2229

IFCBAA recommends that RCEP Parties prioritise:

- wider adoption of MLETR or MLETR-aligned legislation, with Australia and Singapore taking a leadership role in progressing this work through RCEP
- mutual legal recognition and interoperability of electronic transferable records, including electronic bills of lading
- electronic exchange and verification of the origin information necessary to support regional accumulation
- wider acceptance and interoperability of electronic Certificates of Origin and other origin documentation
- greater interoperability between customs, Single Window and other border systems
- secure mechanisms enabling origin and other trade data to be exchanged between suppliers, traders, customs brokers, freight forwarders and customs administrations
- development and mutual recognition of appropriate digital identity and trader-authentication frameworks
- greater regional consistency in standards applying to electronic trade and transport documentation

The objective should not simply be to replace paper documents with electronic copies. The longer-term objective should be an interoperable RCEP trade environment in which trusted data can move securely with the transaction, be authenticated and reused across the supply chain, and be recognised by businesses, financial institutions, logistics providers and border agencies across participating economies.

Recommendation 3 – Improve Practical Accessibility for SMEs

The complexity associated with international trade agreements can disproportionately affect small and medium enterprises.

SMEs may need to determine which preferential agreement applies to a transaction, understand differing rules of origin, obtain supporting information from overseas suppliers and maintain sufficient evidence to substantiate a preferential claim.

Where Australia has both a bilateral free trade agreement and RCEP arrangements with a trading partner, businesses may also need to determine which agreement provides the most appropriate pathway for their particular transaction. This reinforces the importance of

International Forwarders & Customs Brokers Association of Australia Ltd - ABN 92 287 746 091
P: 02 9587 1986 E: ifcbaano@ifcbaa.com W: www.ifcbaa.com
7C/2-4 Northumberland Rd Caringbah NSW 2229

practical tools that allow businesses to compare tariff outcomes and understand the applicable rules of origin and other requirements.

Practical guidance should also recognise the different roles of importers, exporters and producers. For Australian imports, the importer and its customs broker may identify a preferred FTA, but access to the preference depends on the overseas exporter or producer being able to provide appropriate origin evidence. For Australian exports, the overseas customer may request a particular FTA, while the Australian exporter or producer must determine whether the goods satisfy its origin requirements and whether the necessary documentation can be supplied. Tools comparing tariff rates should therefore also explain documentary responsibilities and help businesses discuss the available options with their trading partners.

Australia's Free Trade Agreement Portal provides a useful example of this approach. The Portal enables businesses to search tariff outcomes under Australia's FTAs, compare available agreements and access relevant rules of origin and other information. Resources of this kind can assist SMEs and their advisers to understand the options available and make more informed decisions about which preferential arrangement may be appropriate for a particular transaction.

IFCBAA recommends that RCEP Parties build on resources such as Australia's FTA Portal and provide practical assistance to businesses, including:

- clearer guidance explaining when and how RCEP may benefit businesses operating regional supply chains
- practical examples demonstrating the operation of regional accumulation
- practical tools and guidance to assist businesses in understanding and complying with origin requirements, including the evidence necessary to support preferential claims
- programs supporting digital capability among SMEs participating in regional trade.

There may also be value in considering whether RCEP Parties could progressively link or improve interoperability between national FTA portals and tariff tools, providing businesses with more consistent access to tariff, origin and customs information across the RCEP region.

International Forwarders & Customs Brokers Association of Australia Ltd - ABN 92 287 746 091
P: 02 9587 1986 E: ifcbaano@ifcbaa.com W: www.ifcbaa.com
7C/2-4 Northumberland Rd Caringbah NSW 2229

Conclusion

RCEP offers important opportunities for Australian businesses participating in regional supply chains, particularly where its accumulation provisions provide advantages not available under bilateral agreements. Realising those opportunities requires more than favourable tariff outcomes: businesses must be able to establish origin, obtain reliable supporting information and navigate the practical differences between available agreements.

The decision to use RCEP or another FTA is often shaped by both sides of a transaction. Importers may seek a particular preferential outcome, but exporters and producers frequently control the evidence needed to support it. Greater clarity about these respective responsibilities, simpler origin processes and interoperable electronic documentation would make RCEP more accessible and reduce unnecessary compliance burdens.

IFCBAA encourages RCEP Parties to prioritise practical reforms that strengthen regional accumulation, facilitate trusted digital trade information and improve support for SMEs. IFCBAA would welcome further consultation on implementation measures informed by the experience of customs brokers, freight forwarders, importers and exporters.

Brad Leonard
Manager – Border & Biosecurity
International Forwarders & Customs Brokers Association of Australia Ltd (IFCBAA)

P: 0411 420 465
E: bleonard@ifcbaa.com
W: www.ifcbaa.com