Standards Australia

Submission

General Review of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

16 October 2026



We are the nation's leading **independent, non-governmental, and not-for-profit** organisation for developing standards.

Standards Australia was founded in
1922

1947 International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is established with Standards Australia as a founding member.

500+
published documents each year

3/4
of all standards documents are adoptions aligned to international standards

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About Standards Australia

Safe, strong and resilient nations don't simply happen. They are built with wisdom, experience and intent. As Australia's leading independent, non-government standards organisation, Standards Australia brings together thousands of technical experts, industry leaders, consumer advocates and government partners across every sector of the economy. Our work spans agriculture, manufacturing, healthcare, construction spans energy, cybersecurity and emerging technologies. Together, we define what good looks like, ensuring Australian capabilities are recognised, respected and competitive, locally and on the global stage.

CEO Foreword

Standards Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the General Review of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

RCEP is an important platform for deepening economic integration across the Indo-Pacific.

As tariffs are reduced, greater alignment in standards and technical requirements will be increasingly important to reducing barriers to trade, improving interoperability and enabling Australian businesses to access regional markets.

As Australia's national standards body, Standards Australia sees a significant opportunity to strengthen standards and conformance cooperation through RCEP. This includes greater use of internationally aligned standards, more structured cooperation on standards and conformity assessment, and early alignment in strategic and emerging sectors such as digital trade, artificial intelligence, critical minerals and clean energy.

Standards Australia stands ready to work with the Australian Government and our regional counterparts to bring Australian technical and industry expertise together and support practical outcomes for trade, innovation and regional economic integration.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission, along with any other ways that we could support the Government in this important area.



Rod Balding
Chief Executive Officer

The Role of Standards Australia

Standards Australia is recognised as Australia's peak national standards body under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Australian Government. As Australia's representative to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), we are specialists in the development and adoption of internationally aligned standards in Australia. This process works in accordance with Australia's obligations under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement).

Standards Australia has taken an active role in supporting the Australian Government's agenda to foster regional economic integration through RCEP.

Standards Australia supports greater alignment with international standards across the Indo-Pacific. As a technical partner and capacity builder in the Pacific, we work with countries to strengthen standards systems that support safety, quality and trade, while responding to regional needs and priorities. Building on this experience, greater cooperation on internationally aligned standards through RCEP presents an important opportunity to reduce technical barriers to trade and deepen regional economic integration.

Despite increasing geopolitical complexity, standards cooperation remains a practical area where progress continues to be made. Businesses, regulators and governments across the region continue to share a common interest in interoperability, market access, supply chain efficiency and the adoption of emerging technologies. As a result, international standards development and implementation remains one of the most active and constructive forms of international cooperation, presenting significant opportunities for RCEP members to deepen economic integration through practical, rules-based collaboration.

RCEP represents the world's largest free trade agreement and provides a significant opportunity to strengthen economic integration across the Indo-Pacific.

However, market access is shaped not only by tariffs, but also by the standards and technical requirements businesses must meet to participate in different markets. Where these requirements diverge unnecessarily, businesses face duplication, additional compliance costs and barriers to trade. International standards harmonisation and trusted conformity assessment can ease this regulatory burden, making standards cooperation an important lever in achieving RCEP's broader trade and economic integration objectives.

Recommendations

Standards Australia recommends that Australia advocate through the RCEP General Review for:

1. Stronger RCEP commitments to the use of internally aligned standards, in particular, ISO and IEC standards, reducing unnecessary technical barriers to trade.
2. A structured RCEP standards and conformance cooperation mechanism to identify areas of divergence, support harmonisation efforts and improve cooperation on conformity assessment.
3. Targeted standards cooperation in strategic and emerging sectors, including digital trade, AI, cybersecurity, critical minerals and clean energy technologies.

(1) Strengthen RCEP's commitment to international standards

Standards Australia sees an opportunity for RCEP to support greater alignment with internationally recognised standards across member economies.

Working with Standards Australia provides access to Australian technical expertise from industry, helping ensure international standards reflect practical experience and support Australia's economic and trade interests.

Greater alignment with international standards can reduce unnecessary technical barriers to trade, improve interoperability and make it easier for businesses to operate across regional markets.

The significance of standards to international trade is increasingly being recognised, with the World Bank reporting that "nearly 90 per cent of world trade is now shaped by non-tariff measures, mostly linked to standards."[1]

Industry-driven international standards also support broader economic, social and environmental progress, including more resilient infrastructure, improved health and safety, protection of natural resources and the responsible development and uptake of emerging technologies.

Beyond its existing functions, RCEP could take a more active role in promoting the use of common international standards across member economies.

In practice, this could involve RCEP members reaffirming a preference for internationally recognised standards, such as ISO and IEC standards, when developing technical regulations, procurement requirements and conformity assessment frameworks. Greater use of common standards would help ensure that products, systems and services can be more easily traded throughout the region.

[1] World Development Report 2025, World Bank Group, p. xxiii

(2) Establish a structured standards and conformance mechanism

Standards Australia considers that a more systematic approach to standards harmonisation in RCEP could help address non-tariff barriers (NTBs) to trade.

While stronger commitments to international standards adoption focus on what standards countries use, enhanced harmonisation mechanisms focus on how member states work together to achieve and maintain alignment over time.

Standards cooperation should therefore be recognised as an important component of trade policy, with Standards Australia well placed to support Australia's engagement in these efforts.

Technical barriers to trade often involve a complex range of issues and can be deeply embedded in regulatory systems. Divergent standards create incompatibilities which become barriers to cross-border trade and constrain regional value chains. Standards Australia's expert technical committees can support in identifying these areas of divergence and opportunities where greater international alignment could improve market access.

The economic impact of technical and other NTBs can be significant. One study estimated that NTBs reduced global trade by 3.1 per cent in 2015, equivalent to approximately US$512 billion in trade that might have otherwise occurred.[2]

With the significance of NTBs to international trade remaining broadly similar to 2015, addressing standards related barriers is critical to facilitating trade and improving market access.

For Australian businesses, divergent standards and technical requirements across RCEP markets can require multiple testing, certification and compliance processes for substantially similar products and services.

A more systematic approach to standards harmonisation would reduce these costs, improve supply chain efficiency and increase the scalability of Australian goods, services and digital solutions across the region.

RCEP could establish a standing Standards and Conformance Cooperation Mechanism to identify and prioritise sectors where harmonisation would deliver significant trade benefits, including digital trade and e-commerce, renewable technologies and artificial intelligence. For each priority sector, members could map existing standards, identify material divergences, develop alignment roadmaps and monitor the adoption of international standards. This would provide a structured process for addressing standards-related barriers to trade and investment.

Beyond the harmonisation of standards themselves, RCEP should encourage greater cooperation on conformity assessment, including mutual recognition arrangements and reliance mechanisms that reduce unnecessary duplication of testing, inspection and certification activities.

Standards Australia, together with other members of Australia's standards and conformance ecosystem, could play an important role in this work, connecting relevant expertise with RCEP's broader objectives of reducing technical barriers to trade and improving regional market access.

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[2] Bertelsmann Stiftung, Policy Brief 2017/09, 'How Hidden Protectionism Impacts International Trade', p. 5

(3) Prioritise standards cooperation in strategic and emerging sectors

Standards Australia considers that early standards cooperation in strategic and emerging sectors can prevent new technical barriers and support interoperable regional markets.

Many of the sectors that will drive economic growth over the next 20 years are still developing their technical and regulatory foundations.

RCEP has an important opportunity to shape these foundations early, promoting greater alignment around international standards, interoperable systems and coordinated approaches across member economies.

By embedding standards cooperation as these sectors develop, RCEP can move beyond addressing existing barriers to trade and help prevent new technical barriers from emerging, supporting more integrated and scalable regional markets and supply chains.

This approach could be applied across strategically important and emerging sectors including digital trade, renewable and clean energy technologies, critical minerals and other sectors where international frameworks are still evolving. Digital trade provides a particularly strong example of the potential benefits of this broader approach.

Digital commerce depends on interoperable systems for digital identity, electronic invoicing, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence governance and trusted data exchange. Early alignment with internationally recognised standards in these areas can facilitate cross-border transactions and prevent divergent technical requirements from becoming future barriers to trade.

Evidence from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) demonstrates the potential benefits. According to the ASEAN Digital Trade Standards Roadmap, deeper harmonisation of digital trade standards across ASEAN could increase exports by up to 9.9 per cent, add approximately US$158 billion to regional gross domestic product (GDP) and support up to 10 million jobs by 2030.[3] These benefits are expected to flow not only to ASEAN economies but also to Australian businesses operating across the region through reduced compliance costs, simplified market access, increased interoperability and greater certainty in cross-border digital transactions.

Digital trade illustrates how RCEP could move beyond responding to barriers and instead help establish shared technical foundations before divergent requirements become entrenched.

RCEP's existing provisions on e-commerce, telecommunications and digital trade largely focus on facilitating transactions. Future reviews could draw on Singapore's Digital Economy Agreements and the broader Digital Economy Partnership Agreement as practical models for cooperation on digital standards and interoperability.

The same principle can be applied beyond digital trade. In the emerging green economy, for example, different definitions of what constitutes a "green", "low-carbon" or "sustainable" product can make cross-border recognition more difficult. Greater cooperation on international standards and common methodologies could support recognition across markets and the exchange of sustainability information throughout regional supply chains.

[3] Roadmap on Digital Trade Standards in ASEAN, ASEAN, p. 31

Conclusion

Standards Australia thanks the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for the opportunity to contribute to the RCEP General Review and recognises the important role RCEP already plays in supporting regional economic integration, trade and cooperation across the Indo-Pacific.

Looking ahead, Standards Australia recommends that standards and conformance cooperation become a more prominent part of Australia's priorities for the next phase of RCEP implementation. Stronger commitments to international standards, supported by structured standards and conformance cooperation, would help identify and reduce technical barriers to trade, improve regional interoperability and prevent new barriers from emerging in strategically important sectors.

As Australia's national standards body, Standards Australia stands ready to work with the Department to advance this agenda. Through our technical expertise, industry networks and engagement with international counterparts, we can support the identification of priority sectors and opportunities for international alignment, connect Australian stakeholders with international standards development, and help translate standards cooperation into practical trade and economic outcomes.

We welcome the opportunity for further engagement with the Department on these priorities and on how Standards Australia can support Australia's broader objectives for regional economic integration.

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