

Establishment and publication of average release times: Article 7.6

The release of goods is a critical step in the clearance process undertaken by customs authorities. Often the process involves coordination among multiple agencies such as the port authority, ministry of health, departments of agriculture and veterinary, national committee of standards, etc. and it is not unusual to witness inefficiencies and unjustifiable delays at the border due to lack of agency cooperation.

Members are encouraged to publish periodically, and in a consistent manner, the average release time of goods.

Within this context, the WTO TFA encourages WTO Members to measure and publish the average release times of goods at the border to provide traders the time usually taken to release the goods.

The measure

ARTICLE 7 RELEASE AND CLEARANCE OF GOODS

6 Establishment and Publication of Average Release Times

6.1 Members are encouraged to measure and publish their average release time of goods periodically and in a consistent manner, using tools such as, *inter alia*, the Time Release Study of the World Customs Organization (referred to in this Agreement as the WCO).

6.2 Members are encouraged to share with the WTO Committee on Trade Facilitation their experiences in measuring average release times, including methodologies used, bottlenecks identified, and any resulting effects on efficiency.

Understanding the measure

What is covered?

Core obligation

Fulfilling Article 7.6 is not obligatory and relies on best endeavor efforts. Members are encouraged to set up a system to measure and publish the average release time of goods. WTO Members are to do so periodically and consistently, so that the average release times remain current and valid for trade transactions at all times.

The Time Release Study methodology of WCO is the recommended tool to measure the average release time. According to this tool, the average release time of goods could cover the entire period between the arrival of the goods and their departure from the border crossing point. The scope and methodology to measure average release time is at the discretion of the member country.

In addition, Members are also encouraged to share with the WTO Committee on Trade Facilitation their national experiences and best practices on measuring average release times, including methodologies used, bottlenecks identified and any outcomes which have positively affected the efficiency of customs procedures.

Successful implementation may include the following measurements:

- Time taken between arrival of goods at the border and their release;
- Calculation of average time required for release of goods by customs clearance point, type of transport and customs regime;
- Average time taken for release of goods in respect of intervention of other agencies;
- Average time taken for release of goods under duty exemption;
- Average time taken for release of goods selected according to the type of test procedures.

What is not covered?

The measure does not mention how to publish this information and leaves it to the discretion of Members to use the most effective means of publication on a case by case basis. It is implied that the principles of transparency and efficiency are the basis of this measure.

Benefits and opportunities for stakeholders

The publication of release times will benefit business operators, intermodal carriers, cargo industry and other intermediaries who will have access to statistical evidence on identified bottlenecks and possible areas of improvement to be made. Ideally, the evidence of lengthy release times will help advocate for reducing unnecessary delays at the border, especially benefitting SMEs.

Quick access to accurate information on average release times will also improve traders' compliance and capacity to predict arrival times for imported goods thus improving efficacy and efficiency of their trade performance and supply value chains.

Conducting this kind of study will also give customs authorities the opportunity to better understand the operating environment, identify bottlenecks in the clearance and release processes, and improve the quality of services provided.

Implementation

Implementation checklist

The following checklist may be used to estimate the level of compliance with the measure:

- A methodology has been devised to estimate the entire period between the arrival of goods and their departure from the border crossing point.
- The information on average release times pertaining to importation is published.
- A review of average release times is conducted regularly.
- Best practices on measuring and reducing release times are shared with other WTO Members within the WTO Committee on Trade Facilitation.

Preparing a national implementation plan

The following template may be used as the basis for a national implementation plan:

Implementation sequence	Actions suggested
	Preparatory phase
	Review the country's legal and regulatory frameworks to determine if any change is required.
	Establish a working group responsible for the project, involving as many stakeholders in the supply chain.
	Devise the frequency, scope and methodology of a study to measure average release times.
	Incorporate ICT systems to support processes and assess the user-friendliness and accessibility of information provided.
	Set-up phase
	Train the working group on how to conduct the study.
	Introduce changes in legal and regulatory frameworks and business processes.
	Collect and record data from relevant sources.
	Carry out data analysis and publish a public report.
	Notify the WTO Committee on Trade Facilitation regarding methodologies used, issues identified and any improvement in release times since measurement of release times.
Management and follow-up phase	
Periodically monitor and evaluate the methodology of the study and implement improvements, if any.	
	Evaluate if the publication of the study is done in a user-friendly manner for stakeholders.
Average time for implementation	Between 2 and 3 years.
Leading implementation agency	Customs is most commonly chosen as the leading implementation agency.

Key challenges

Lack of technical skills to carry out the study and absence of strong inter-agency coordination can hamper implementation. Government institutions may not have the required ICT capacity, including publication on the internet. Appropriate staff training and tools to manage coordination may be required.

Key factors for success

Coordination between relevant agencies and building capacity in government authorities will determine the success of this measure.