

Stateline

The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments

Volume 14, Number 9 • September 2005

Several cross-border issues, including security, trade and energy, were the focus of discussion at the recent Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting. The meeting was held in a Canadian province for the first time in the event's 60-year history. Hundreds of state and provincial lawmakers traveled to Regina, Saskatchewan, for the meeting.



For instance, Canada trades more with the United States than anyone else, including itself.

"We're our own second-largest trading partner," she noted. Canadian trade with a single U.S.-based business, Home Depot, is greater than it is with the entire country of France.

On the flip side, the United States relies on the partnership for essential goods and economic growth. Canada is the largest foreign energy supplier to the United States and is the destination for one of every four U.S. exports.

"Sales to Canada create more than a million jobs in the 11 Midwestern states," Colin Robertson said during a keynote address that opened the meeting.

Robertson, who is head of the Canadian Embassy's Washington Advocacy Secretariat, said MLC efforts to bolster state-provincial relations come at an ideal time.

At the federal level, the heads of the two countries, as well as Mexico, recently embarked on the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America.

Under the partnership, working groups of federal leaders have been charged with developing new trilateral strategies and cooperative agreements. Goals range from bolstering border security and improving the flow of goods and people, to better positioning the North American economy in the global marketplace and creating a more reliable energy supply.

"This process won't succeed without your help and involvement," Robertson told the legislators.

In fact, many of the partnership's targeted issues directly involve the work of state and provincial governments.

With that in mind, meeting attendees passed a resolution requesting that the MLC's Midwest-Canada Relations Committee be included in the working groups' ongoing deliberations.

Future solutions also may come directly from groups like the MLC.

"If we've got a problem, we should first try to solve it at the state and provincial level," Robertson said.

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Beyond borders

MLC Annual Meeting examines state of U.S.-Canada relations

by Tim Anderson

Every day, nearly \$2 billion worth of goods and services travel between the United States and Canada.

The result of a deep-rooted relationship between neighbors, this movement benefits both countries at the same time it generates conflict between them, Pamela Wallin said during a speech to the Midwestern Legislative Conference.

"When you have that much trade, there are going to be issues," the Canadian consul general told MLC Annual Meeting attendees.

Many of those cross-border issues were the focus of the work and dialogue between state and provincial lawmakers at the recent meeting.

Held for the first time in a Canadian province, the MLC event brought more than 600 people to Saskatchewan's capital city of Regina. There, legislators built on a partnership that has been serving both countries well for generations.

"Friendships and relationships need maintenance," Wallin told the MLC, "and the most important tool is listening."

But she also said it is useful to understand the extent and importance of the relationship.

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Stateline Midwest is published monthly by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments.

Annual subscription rate: \$60. To order, call 1-800-800-1910.

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Meeting examines border security, U.S.-Canada trade

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Different countries, perspectives

Both Robertson and Wallin said new cross-border challenges are testing leaders at all levels of government.

The closing of beef markets, concerns about emerging global trade competitors, and the threat of terrorism all have the potential to lead to greater collaboration. But they also can produce more tension as well.

“We need to speak more frankly with one another a lot more,” Wallin said.

Part of that openness, she believes, requires Canada and the United States to acknowledge their differences.

Those differences begin with how the two countries view each other.

“Americans are benevolently unaware of Canada,” Wallin said, “and Canadians are malevolently aware of the United States.”

The North American neighbors have different world views as well, especially in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

“9/11 is the frame through which Americans see the world,” she said. “It is the frame through which they make political decisions.”

The two countries also have distinct political systems and citizenries with different outlooks on patriotism and religion.

Still, the two countries share much more than a border.

“There are more differences east-west within the countries than there are differences north-south between them,” Wallin said.

And the prosperity of the two countries remains connected, Robertson said.

The speeches by Wallin and Robertson reflected the meeting’s theme, “Building Our Future Together.”

Lawmakers also participated in a variety of public policy sessions, some of which examined the U.S.-Canada partnership on issues related to border security, trade and energy.

Shared border, concerns

The United States and Canada share a 5,500-

mile border — the longest undefended boundary between two countries in the world.

Before Sept. 11, management of this border received relatively scant attention. But it now has become a top national security issue, one that is receiving more scrutiny and demanding greater cooperation, said Deborah Myers, a policy analyst for the Policy Migration Institute.

She spoke to MLC attendees about the work being done to improve border management and the role that states and provinces can play.

One objective of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America is to create by 2008 a single, integrated program for “trusted

travelers” — people who cross the border frequently and safely between the countries. It would provide these travelers with access to special customs lines and designated lanes at U.S.-Canada crossings.

To work, though, this kind of fast-track program requires greater information sharing and an improved infrastructure at the border, both of which can be addressed at the state level, Myers said.

She believes the two countries also must work on immigration reforms, from liberalizing

regulations on the exchange of skilled professionals to making rules on undocumented workers more realistic and enforceable.

In his keynote address, Robertson said effective collaborative work can ensure that the border is secure and open.

He worries, though, that some current plans will disrupt movement between the two countries — particularly a pending rule requiring Americans to have a passport when re-entering the United States from Canada.

“It flies in the face of the progress we’ve been making in keeping the border both safe and business friendly,” he said. “Surely there’s got to be a better way.”

A central reason for keeping the border open is the amount of trade that now exists between the countries.

This exchange of goods and services has grown rapidly in recent years with the passage of free-

trade agreements. However, several MLC meeting speakers said more can be done to integrate North American markets.

According to Robertson, a thicket of rules and regulations still hampers trade between the countries.

International trade expert Peter Clark believes harmonizing certain standards and rules would enhance the countries’ competitiveness outside the continent. His suggestions include adopting a single external tariff and developing a North American border pass with biometric identifiers.

Wallin also urged leaders from both sides of the border to look at their trading partnership more globally. Disputes between the two countries may linger, she said, but that shouldn’t stop policymakers from addressing shared concerns and opportunities in the world marketplace.

“We have to focus this relationship in the context of China, India and others,” she added.

Powerful relationship

Energy has long been an integral part of the relationship between Canada and the United States. The largest producer of energy per capita among the G-7 nations, Canada has a valued consumer to the south. Its share of U.S. natural gas imports is 85 percent. Canada also accounts for 16 percent of U.S. imports of crude oil and refined products.


The countries’ electricity grids also are deeply integrated, as illustrated by the massive blackout of 2003 that affected parts of the Midwest and Ontario.

Joseph Dukert, an adjunct fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the blackout also revealed serious problems with the North American electricity grid.

Recent passage of a new U.S. energy bill should help, Dukert believes, because it will establish and enforce mandatory reliability standards for the countries’ shared electric system.

But both he and Francis Bradley, vice president of the Canadian Electricity Association, said more needs to be done.

Bradley said a better investment climate and clearer regulatory framework are needed to build the region’s energy infrastructure.

Improving the system also will require new transmission lines and pipelines, which will result in state lawmakers having to address politically sensitive siting issues, Dukert said. 



Pamela Wallin

“There are more differences east-west within the countries than there are differences north-south between the countries.”

Pamela Wallin

Canadian consul general to New York



Colin Robertson delivers the keynote address that opened the 60th Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Legislative Conference. The meeting was held in Regina, Saskatchewan. Its theme was “Building Our Future Together.”