

SPEAKING NOTES

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**15 Years of Free Trade
Looking Back, Looking Forward**

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Speaking time: 5 minutes

- Check Against Delivery -

Thank you for that warm introduction.

On behalf of Alberta International and Intergovernmental Relations and Minister Halvar Jonson, it is a pleasure to welcome you to this conference.

Minister Jonson regrets he is unable to be here today, but he has asked me to pass along his best wishes for a successful afternoon.

I am sure that as individuals with a keen interest in global trade, the timing of this conference is not lost on you.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of an agreement that many would argue has had a substantial impact on Alberta's economy and has influenced trade policy around the world – the North American Free Trade Agreement.

This is also the 15th anniversary of the precursor to the NAFTA, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

Most of you are more than familiar with the nature of Alberta's economic performance under the free trade agreements.

Ninety per cent of all merchandise exports from Alberta in 2003 were destined for either the United States or Mexico, up from 70 per cent in 1988.

The value of our exports to the U.S. and Mexico has quintupled since the implementation of the Canada-U.S. FTA and it has tripled since the start of the NAFTA.

This strong export performance is not only due to oil and natural gas or commodity exports. Alberta has experienced rapid growth in highly-manufactured exports, which have grown five-fold in value since the NAFTA came into force.

This robust export performance impacts more than just our bottom line. The free trade agreements have been tools that have helped us build on our status as a global player in international trade.

Alberta used to be the third largest exporting province in Canada – behind the much more populous Ontario and

Quebec. The most recent statistical data available shows that Alberta has surpassed Quebec.

This translates into opportunities for the people of Alberta. Large and small businesses have a positive environment to realize their full potential and Albertans have increased employment opportunities.

My comments so far have been about the past effects of the free trade agreements. Albertans and the Alberta government are also interested in the future.

Alberta has long been a supporter of continued efforts to reduce trade barriers and promote trade liberalization.

Alberta continues to press the federal government to speak to our NAFTA partners about:

- Harmonizing external tariffs and eliminating rules of origin;
- Enhancing market access in energy and agricultural trade;
- Reforming trade remedy rules;
- Facilitating regulatory cooperation;

Our government believes we should look at opportunities to use existing free trade agreements to improve the flow of commodities and people over international borders.

Using under-utilized mechanisms in current agreements to address issues that we did not solve when the agreements were first negotiated may achieve this objective.

First, we need a clearer vision of what it will take to promote the growth of our continent as an integrated economic unit. It is an ambitious agenda, but it is one our government supports.

The 20-year plan released earlier this year by the Alberta government includes strategies to make sure there are mechanisms in place to allow business to maintain an edge in the increasingly competitive world marketplace.

The insight provided by experts such as those here today provides us with further food for thought as we consider steps that might be taken to reach our international trade goals.

I would like to conclude by extending my appreciation to the Western Centre for Economic Research and the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce for organizing this event.

The Alberta government recognizes the benefits of developing analysis on trade policies such as the free trade agreements through forums such as this one, and the importance of working with the private sector in sharing this information with the public.

Our government also appreciates that our ability to be successful in continuing to pursue trade liberalization is due to the continued support of the private sector.

The organizers have worked to bring together some of the leading experts on trade policy and trade law in our country. I look forward to their insights on what has happened in the past and what we can expect in the future.

Thank you.