

Intellectual Property Agency Celebrates 40th Anniversary

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Maria Pallante, Associate Register for Policy and International Affairs, answers questions from the podium at a joint Copyright Office–WIPO symposium held at the Library of Congress in March.

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is 40 years old this year. April 26 marked the 40th anniversary of the entry into force of the international convention that created it. Through WIPO, member states negotiate with one another about protection and use of intellectual property around the world.

Today, WIPO has 184 member states, including the United States, and it administers 24 international treaties. But it started out much smaller. Its roots go back to 1873, when foreign exhibitors refused to attend the International Exhibition of Inventions in Vienna, fearing their ideas would be stolen and commercially exploited in other countries.

In response, two major international treaties were developed over the following decade to help people from one country obtain protection in other countries for their intellectual work. In 1884 the Paris Convention for the Protection of Intellectual Property took effect to protect inventions, trademarks, and industrial designs. Two years later, the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works entered into force to protect novels, short stories, musicals, songs, paintings, and other creative works.

The separate offices set up to administer the two treaties united in 1893 to form the United

International Bureaux for the Protection of Intellectual Property, known by its French acronym, BIRPI. In 1970, following the entry into force of the convention establishing WIPO, BIRPI became WIPO. Four years later, WIPO became a specialized agency of the United Nations. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland.

WIPO's mandate, including that devoted to copyright, has grown over the years. Besides coordinating the crafting of copyright treaties, administering them, and making sure they stay up to date with fast-changing technology, WIPO helps developing countries set up effective copyright regimes, trains copyright officials, and organizes conferences to explore specific issues.

Copyright Office staff regularly serve as U.S. delegates to WIPO meetings and contribute to development of treaties and international agreements. In addition, the Office cosponsors international training symposiums with WIPO, most recently this past March. Participants from developing countries and countries in transition gathered at the Library of Congress from March 8 to 12 to focus on a major current initiative of WIPO: encouraging exceptions and limitations to national copyright laws to improve access to copyrighted works by reading disabled and blind people throughout the world. ©