![UNEP logo]

CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Distr.
GENERAL

UNEP/CBD/BS/BCH-IAC/2/3
24 February 2007

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

INFORMAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF THE
  BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE
Second meeting
Geneva, 23-24 November 2006

**SUMMARY OUTCOMES OF THE MEETING OF THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE
INFORMAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   The Informal Advisory Committee of the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH-IAC) met in Geneva on 23 and 24 November 2006.

2.   The meeting was attended by representatives selected from the following countries: Cameroon; Canada; China; Colombia; Cuba; European Community; Mexico; Namibia; Samoa; Slovenia; Switzerland; South Africa; and Uzbekistan. Representatives of the following organizations also participated: the Division of Global Environment Facility Coordination of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP/GEF); the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB); the Biosafety Interdisciplinary Network; the Third World Network; and the Global Industry Coalition.

3.   The meeting was convened by the Executive Secretary, in accordance with the modalities of operation of the Biosafety Clearing-House (decision BS-I/3, annex, section E), to seek guidance with respect to technical issues associated with the ongoing development of the Biosafety Clearing-House.

4.   The meeting elected Darja Stanic Racman (Slovenia) to serve as its Chairperson, and Regla Maria Diaz Jiminez (Cuba) to serve as Rapporteur.

5.   The meeting adopted the provisional agenda provided in document UNEP/CBD/BS/BCH-IAC/2/1. The following main items were discussed by the Committee:

   (a)   Introduction and overview;

   (b)   National implementation and case-studies of national experiences;

   (c)   Partnership arrangements and methods to promote collaboration;

   (d)   Progress in the multi-year programme of work;

   (e)   Capacity-building activities;

   (f)   Review of common formats; and

   (g)   BCH Web Service and backward compatibility.

/…

6.   The meeting benefited from several presentations to assist the participants in their deliberation of the agenda, including presentations from the Secretariat on the status of implementation of the Biosafety Clearing-House, progress of the Multi-Year Programme of Work, and technical issues; presentations on national experiences from the members from Colombia, Mexico, Canada, and Uzbekistan; presentations on partnership experiences with the Biosafety Clearing-House from ICGEB; and presentations on capacity-building activities being undertaken by UNEP/GEF, Canada and the Biosafety Interdisciplinary Network.

II.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

7.   The Informal Advisory Committee of the Biosafety Clearing-House discussed the items outlined in the annotated agenda (UNEP/CBD/BS/BCH-IAC/2/1/Add.1).

8.   Recognizing that some improvements might still be needed in the evolution of the Central Portal, and the ongoing need for capacity-building, the Committee considered that current options for making information available to the Biosafety Clearing-House are sufficient and effective to allow most of the Parties to fulfil their obligations to provide information to the Biosafety Clearing-House.

9.   The Committee considered the following issues in depth: management of information at national level; design of the Central Portal; capacity-building; partnership arrangements; compliance issues; interoperability mechanisms; and the multi-year programme of work.

10.   This section summarizes the main comments and recommendations made to the Executive Secretary for consideration in implementation of the programme of work for the Biosafety Clearing-House:

A.   *Management of information at national level*

(a)   Note that it is essential for the international community that each Government meets the reporting requirements of the Protocol;

(b)   Some countries are reluctant to make information internationally public through BCH (e.g. vulnerability to criticism, need to explain changes) and have sensitivities about creating summaries (e.g. information required in common formats for registering laws)

    (i)   Encourage countries facing such difficulties to register at least minimal sets of information with a link to an original document if possible as a preliminary measure, recognizing that this does not fulfil their reporting obligations of the Protocol but that it may assist implementing the Protocol.

    (ii)   Include clear disclaimer on use of summaries in the Central Portal.

(c)   Domestic difficulties can be experienced in sharing information between sectors responsible for reporting or collecting information at local level.

    (i)   Encourage involvement of stakeholders through showing the relevance of the BCH as a tool to realize the objectives of the Protocol.

    (ii)   Call on Governments to make effective implementation of the BCH at national level a priority.

    (iii)   Call on Governments to support focal points and competent national authorities and to support interlinkages between them.

(d)   Some countries have difficulties in correlating domestic regulatory procedures with reporting requirements for the BCH (e.g. multiple risk assessments used for single decision; risk assessment summaries are contained within decision; planting is considered domestic decision under Article 11 rather than AIA decision).

       (i)   Encourage countries facing such difficulties to register at least minimal sets of information with a link to an original document if possible as a preliminary measure, recognizing that this does not fulfil their reporting obligations of the Protocol but that it may assist implementing the Protocol.

       (ii)   Explore options to facilitate countries registering a single record in multiple categories.

       (iii)   Request governments to provide relevant information about such domestic situations in their country profile.

(e)   Many countries are still not reporting certain categories of information nor providing information about their 'null returns' (i.e. cases where 0 records are registered).

       (i)   Where possible, circulate requirements for reporting information (and status of information reported) to a wider audience. For example, include notifications relevant to BCH in the Current Awareness Service.

       (ii)   Publish list of countries that have provided this information.

B.   Design of the Central Portal

(f)   Welcome the development of the LMO registry.

(g)   Note that translation inconsistencies in the BCH Central Portal should be addressed by availability of translation funds in the Protocol budget from 2007.

(h)   Additional tools to improve accessibility of information could include:

       (i)   Provide additional guidance for completing common formats (such as sample filled formats) and clarify the relationship between common formats and the Protocol reporting requirements.

       (ii)   Make certain information available on the Protocol website also available in the BCH, such as text of the Protocol and the Biosafety Protocol Newsletter.

       (iii)   Display information visually, such as by plotting the distribution of approved LMOs on a map.

(i)   Improved technical documentation is needed to assist countries developing national BCH nodes.

       (i)   Consolidate existing resources and create new resources to address gaps.

       (ii)   Make resources easily accessible through the Central Portal in a technical portal.

       (iii)   Document history of changes to the BCH and its exchange mechanisms.

C.   Capacity-building

(j)   Note that currently the UNEP-GEF BCH project and other donors are effectively assisting a large number of countries to implement their BCH obligations under the Protocol.

(k)   Recognize that capacity-building is an ongoing process.

   (i)   Encourage capacity-building solutions to take into account country needs such as ability for customization and user friendly interfaces.

   (ii)   Encourage countries to share their open source based solutions (e.g. PHP: Hypertext processor).

   (iii)   Encourage countries to consider their on-going needs for access and use of the BCH when submitting their resource allocation framework to the GEF.

(l)   Countries need to address sustainability issues, including access to adequate human, technological and financial resources to maintain their chosen mechanism to provide information to the BCH.

   (i)   Complexities and resources required to implement interoperability using the BCH Crawler or BCH Web Service need to be considered before choosing these options a mechanism of exchange.

   (ii)   Use of the Management Centre of the BCH minimizes the financial and IT resources and infrastructure required and is likely to be the most effective option for many countries since they will have smaller numbers of records to be reported to the BCH.

   (iii)   Invite governments to consider nominating BCH experts to the roster of biosafety experts, such as the regional advisors of the UNEP-GEF BCH project.

   (iv)   Encourage countries that choose to use the BCH Web Service or the BCH Web Crawler to use the most recent version of the Interoperability Mechanisms.

   (v)   Implement tracking of which version of BCH Web Service is being used by interoperable partners to enable the Secretariat to assess the impact of proposed changes.

(m)   Poor or expensive internet connectivity makes training difficult

   (i)   Create a portable BCH Training Server that can be used offline.

(n)   Note with appreciation the support provided by the Secretariat to countries and organizations in providing information to the BCH and developing their national nodes.

   (i)   Encourage users to communicate directly with the Secretariat (or regional advisors if appropriate) for technical assistance.

   (ii)   Encourage the technical community to share their expertise with other users through the discussion forums.

D.   Partnership arrangement

(o)   Welcome current partnerships, such as information on the commercialization status of LMOs provided in the BiotradeStatus database, journal records provided to the BIRC from ICGEB, the academic compendium of accredited courses, and resources provide by other organizations.

    (i)   Encourage other organizations to make relevant information available to the BCH, either through interoperability or directly to the Secretariat for inclusion in the Central Portal.

D.   Compliance issues

(p)   Many types of information not currently registered with the BCH are required under the Protocol to be reported to the BCH. It appears that compliance is not necessarily a resource issue, but sometimes results from other factors as explored above.

    (i)   Draw this issue to the attention of the compliance committee.

    (ii)   Consider mechanisms to bring cases of missing information to the attention of the relevant higher authority at national level.

    (iii)   Remind governments that they have been requested to identify and address constraints on providing information, and encourage them to share solutions.

E.   Interoperability mechanisms

(q)   Recognize the increased demand on resources to maintain indefinite backward compatibility with previous versions of interoperability mechanisms and also resource implications for countries and organizations to move to new versions.

    (i)   Undertake impact analysis of phasing-out older versions of the interoperability mechanisms.

    (ii)   Implement a support life policy with phasing out support for older versions 24 months after the release of a new version, in consultation with potentially affected partners.

    (iii)   Inform partners in advance before releasing a new version to allow for planning and testing.

    (iv)   Ensure all relevant information is available to the technical portal to enable all countries and organizations to assess impact of upcoming changes.

F.   Multi-year programme of work

(r)   Recognize the Secretariat accomplishments in implementing their responsibilities under the multi-year programme of work, but note that not all governments have yet implemented the activities under their responsibilities.

    (i)   Remind Governments of their ongoing obligations under the multi-year programme of work.

(s)   Acknowledge limited resources available at the Secretariat (and that the UNEP-GEF BCH project will finish in 2008) and note that there is an increasing need for technical assistance and support.

    (i)   Recommend that the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol makes allowance for additional human resources to be added to Biosafety Clearing-House support team within the Secretariat.