

**CONVENTION ON
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LIAISON GROUP OF TECHNICAL EXPERTS ON
THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE
Montreal, 10-11 April 2003

**SUMMARY OUTCOMES OF THE MEETING OF THE LIAISON GROUP OF TECHNICAL
EXPERTS ON THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE****I. INTRODUCTION**

1. The Liaison Group of Technical Experts on the Biosafety Clearing-House met in Montreal from 10 to 11 April 2003. Twenty technical experts attended the meeting.
2. The meeting was convened to provide advice to the Executive Secretary on the requirements for establishment of national components for participation in the Biosafety Clearing-House, and associated technical issues. This advice is intended to assist in ongoing development of the Biosafety Clearing-House, in particular national components, and to provide input on relevant technical issues to the pre-sessional document on this topic that will be considered by the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.
3. Three main items were discussed by the Liaison Group, namely:
 - (a) Status of implementation of the Biosafety Clearing-House;
 - (b) National experiences in using the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House; and
 - (c) Requirements for the establishment of national components for participation in the Biosafety Clearing-House, and associated technical issues.
4. The following is a summary of the comments and main recommendations made by the Group.

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II. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. *Requirements for establishment of national components for participation in the Biosafety Clearing-House*

5. The implementation of different models of national components would be undertaken in accordance with country needs, and would require countries to commit to standard operating procedures with varying levels of resource commitments. Countries would need to establish strategies to ensure continuity and sustainability of fulfilment of obligations related to the Biosafety Clearing-House (for example, in order to minimize effects of personnel or institutional changes on the operation of the national component).

6. **Recommendation:** The following options can be considered as the basis for national components depending on suitability for meeting country needs and circumstances:

- (a) *Option 1.* National database and central portal:
 - (i) National database to store data, but no local Biosafety Clearing-House website;
 - (ii) Export data from these databases to the Biosafety Clearing-House (and, in cases of poor Internet connectivity, information could be accessed by, for example, CD-ROM);
 - (iii) Use central portal at the Biosafety Clearing-House to store all data on central Biosafety Clearing-House databases (use of Management Centre);
- (b) *Option 2.* National biosafety clearing-house website and central portal:
 - (i) Maintain a local biosafety clearing-house website;
 - (ii) Use central portal at the Biosafety Clearing-House to enter and store metadata centrally, link to records on national site;
- (c) *Option 3.* National biosafety clearing-house website crawled by central Biosafety Clearing-House:
 - (i) Maintain a local Biosafety Clearing-House website;
 - (ii) Make website metadata accessible to the Biosafety Clearing-House (i.e. provide information in XML format so it can be harvested by the Biosafety Clearing-House) – “pull technology”;
- (d) *Option 4.* National interoperable biosafety clearing-house database:
 - (i) Develop and maintain interoperable database according to Biosafety Clearing-House interoperability protocols and meet minimum standards (national database/XML) – “push technology”.

7. **Recommendation:** The Secretariat should prepare guidelines on the above.

B. Technical and interoperability issues

8. **Issues:**

- (a) Difficulty in accessing online central portal for Governments with poor or expensive Internet connectivity;
- (b) Getting started in development of national databases to store biosafety data.

9. **Possible solutions:**

- (a) Instant Biosafety Clearing-House database template
 - (i) Secretariat to develop simple templates that could be used with existing software programs (e.g., Access and others) to store data at national level in Biosafety Clearing-House common formats;
 - (ii) Provide function to export this data in XML format to the Biosafety Clearing-House;
- (b) Be open to using regional biosafety clearing-houses to assist countries in cases where the capacity to establish national biosafety clearing-houses is particularly limited. Emphasis should be on building capacities at the national level to promote ownership and a bottom-up approach.

10. **Issue:** The need for additional guidance for information-technology experts dealing with the Biosafety Clearing-House.

11. **Possible solutions:**

- (a) More defined technical guidance in the Biosafety Clearing-House toolkit for programmers, such as description of parameters and arguments;
- (b) Troubleshooting section of toolkit for programmers;
- (c) Mechanisms to promote collaboration between information-technology experts, national focal points for the Biosafety Clearing-House and partner organizations through, for example, the use of electronic discussion groups to facilitate cooperation and discussion, with a view to assisting the Secretariat in ongoing implementation of the Biosafety Clearing-House.

12. **Issue:** Potential need for additional security or authentication procedures to ensure security of data submitted to the central portal:

13. **Possible solutions:** Although the Biosafety Clearing-House already uses SSL to ensure secure transmission of data, and encryption for ID and passwords, consideration should be given to the use of PKI, PMI or other mechanisms to ensure data are coming from legitimate sources and is not tampered with during transmission.

C. Data structure and management issues

14. The Liaison Group noted that the pilot phase is a prototype and that while there is a need to maintain a stable system (particularly for interoperable databases), it is important to ensure a level of

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flexibility that will enable the Biosafety Clearing-House to adapt to country feedback as well as the need to incorporate new types of information, etc., particularly with respect to mandatory fields in common formats and terminology used for controlled vocabulary.

15. ***Recommendations:***

(a) Allow for repeatable fields using the XML “language” attribute for the submission of a record in more than one language, when so desired;

(b) Allow for flexibility in the database for dealing with complex records such as some domestic decisions (e.g., decisions where approval depends on use or comes from several authorities).

D. Ways and means to meet identified training needs

16. Broad capacity-building concerns were reflected throughout the Liaison Group’s deliberations. The present section focuses on training issues not already covered above.

17. ***Recommendation:***

(a) Development of multiple training modules (e.g., beginners, intermediate, advanced);

(b) Short-term focus on use of central portal and the management centre to fulfil the requirements of the Protocol;

(c) Longer-term focus on progressive development of the Biosafety Clearing-House at the national level;

(d) Target the correct people in the scope of training;

(e) Both national and regional level training have a role. In that respect, a cascading approach including the use of regional workshops to reach a large number of participants in a short time could be envisaged.
