



CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

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PRESS RELEASE

Biosafety Protocol conference to finalize shipping documentation rules for genetically modified commodities

Montreal, 30 May 2005 – The 119 member governments to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety are meeting here this week until 3 June to clarify international trade rules for genetically modified commodities.

The five-day meeting of the treaty's governing body is scheduled to take a decision on the detailed documentation requirements for bulk shipments of genetically modified corn, soybean and other agricultural commodities that are intended for food, feed or processing. According to the Protocol (Article 18.2 (a)), Parties to the Protocol have to take that decision by 11 September 2005 – that is no later than two years after the date of entry into force of the Protocol. Up till then such shipments must be identified as "may contain" living modified organisms".

Adopted in January 2000 as a supplementary agreement to the Convention on Biological Diversity Biosafety, the Biosafety Protocol aims at ensuring that the transboundary movement of living modified organisms or LMOs, also commonly known as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) does not adversely affect biological diversity. Risks to human health are also taken into account.

"The question of documentation accompanying GMO shipments has been one of most contentious issues since the Protocol negotiations", said Mr. Hamdallah Zedan, Executive Secretary of both the Protocol and its parent agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

"The debate centres on the trade-offs between the usefulness of detailed information in the documentation in enhancing the safe handling of GMOs and the costs of assembling such documentation. This question is related to the issue of segregating GM from non-GM commodities during storage and transport." he said.

Key decisions to be taken include: details to be provided in the documentation accompanying GM crop shipments, the percentage of modified material ("threshold levels") that these shipments may contain and still be considered GMO-free, and whether to use a new stand-alone document agreed under the Protocol or include the required information on existing commercial invoices.

Other items to be discussed include: options for cooperation in exchanging information on any socio-economic impacts of GMOs, especially on indigenous and local communities; how to ensure that importing countries receive notifications with accurate information prior to the first shipment of a GMO intended for direct introduction into the environment; and guidance on a common approach to risk assessment and risk management.

"The outcome of this week's deliberations is very crucial to the successful implementation of the Biosafety Protocol," said Zedan. "A rigorous and unambiguous system of identifying genetically modified commodities will facilitate their safe handling and transportation thereby advancing the Protocol's objective. It will also clarify the rules of the game for industry, create transparency and predictability in the international trade of those commodities and boost public confidence", he said.

Notes for Journalists

1. The Protocol (Article 18.2) provides that Parties to its shall take a decision on the detailed documentation requirements for shipments of LMOs that are intended for direct use as food or feed, or for processing, no later than two years after the date of entry into force of the Protocol.
2. The Protocol entered into force on 11 September 2003 and so far 118 countries as well as the European Community have ratified it.
3. The first meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, which was held in Malaysian city of Kuala Lumpur in February 2004, adopted detailed information requirements for GMOs (such as genetically engineered seeds and fish) that are destined for direct placement into the environment.
4. The first meeting also laid down other initial essential foundations for implementing the Protocol. These included decisions on:
 - ▶ Procedures to facilitate decision-taking by Parties importing GMOs;
 - ▶ Compliance procedures and mechanisms;
 - ▶ Measures for implementing the identification requirements for documentation accompanying shipments of GMOs;
 - ▶ Modalities of operation of the Biosafety Clearing-House (a mechanism established by the Protocol to facilitate the exchange of information on GMOs and to assist Parties to implement the Protocol); and
 - ▶ An Action Plan for Building Capacities for the Effective Implementation of the Protocol.
5. Further details about the meeting, including background documents, are available on the Protocol website at: <http://www.biodiv.org/biosafety/cop-mop/second-meeting.aspx>
6. Additional information about the Protocol is available at the following Web sites:
 - CBD Web site: <http://www.biodiv.org/biosafety> and
 - Biosafety Clearing-House: <http://bch.biodiv.org/Pilot/Home.aspx>.
 - Frequently asked questions are also available at: <http://www.biodiv.org/biosafety/faqs.asp>

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