



Convention on Biological Diversity

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INFORMAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE

Eleventh meeting

Online, 1-4 December

Item 8 of the provisional agenda*

REPORT OF THE INFORMAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE ON ITS ELEVENTH MEETING

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

1. Article 20 of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity establishes a Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) “as part of the clearing-house mechanism under Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention, in order to: (a) facilitate the exchange of scientific, technical, environmental and legal information on, and experience with, living modified organisms; and (b) to assist Parties to implement the Protocol”.

2. In its decision [BS-I/3](#), the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety adopted the modalities of operation of the BCH. Section E of the modalities of operation states: “The Secretariat may seek assistance from an informal advisory committee, constituted and coordinated by the Executive Secretary in a transparent manner, with a particular focus on providing guidance with respect to resolution of technical issues associated with the ongoing development of the Biosafety Clearing-House.”

3. In accordance with the modalities of operation of the BCH, the Executive Secretary convened the eleventh meeting of the Informal Advisory Committee on the Biosafety Clearing-House to review the progress made since its tenth meeting and to seek further guidance on a number of areas, including improving the functionality of the BCH central portal and its migration to the new platform.

4. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting was held online using the GoToWebinar platform.

B. Attendance

5. The meeting was attended by the members of the Committee from the following Parties to the Cartagena Protocol: Belarus, Bulgaria, Germany, Jamaica, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Republic of Moldova, New Zealand, Nigeria, Saint Lucia, Tajikistan and Turkey. The meeting was also attended by members from the following non-Parties: Canada and United States of America; and by members from the following organizations: the Catholic University of Uruguay, Ecoropa, Global Industry Coalition/CropLife International, International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Environment Programme (BCH III Project).

6. The members of the Committee from Japan, Uruguay and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) were unable to attend the meeting.

* CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/11/1.

7. The list of participants is provided in annex II.

ITEM 1. OPENING OF THE MEETING

8. The Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Ms. Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, opened the meeting at noon GMT/UTC on 1 December 2020. In her opening remarks, she recognized the challenging nature of the circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic and thanked members for adapting their schedules in order to actively participate in the online meeting and to enable the Committee to proceed with its work. She acknowledged the central role of the Biosafety Clearing-House in the implementation and operation of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and noted that the experience with the BCH could help to demonstrate the useful role of online information exchange mechanisms as tools for supporting implementation, which can usefully inform the deliberations on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. She recalled that it had been over four years since the last meeting of the Informal Advisory Committee and that there had been many changes in the Secretariat during that time, which had affected activities on the BCH. She affirmed the Secretariat's responsibility in managing and maintaining the platform and expressed her appreciation that work on the BCH had been re-invigorated in recent months.

ITEM 2. ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

2.1. Election of officers

9. The Committee elected Ms. Nina Duensing chair of the meeting.

2.2. Adoption of the agenda

10. On the basis of the provisional agenda ([CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/11/1](#)) prepared by the Secretariat, the Committee adopted the following agenda:

1. Opening of the meeting.
2. Organizational matters:
 - 2.1. Election of officers;
 - 2.2. Adoption of the agenda;
 - 2.3. Organization of work.
3. Migration of the Biosafety Clearing-House.
4. Status of the current Biosafety Clearing-House.
5. Collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme – Global Environment Facility Biosafety Clearing-House III capacity-building project.
6. Post-2020 processes and the Biosafety Clearing-House.
7. Other matters.
8. Adoption of the report.
9. Closure of the meeting.

2.3. Organization of work

11. The Committee agreed on the organization of its work as outlined in annex I to the annotated provisional agenda ([CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/11/1/Add.1](#)).

12. It was noted that the members of the Informal Advisory Committee were spread across a wide range of time zones, and the schedule of the sessions might therefore make it impossible for some members to join at the beginning of a session or stay through to the end of a session. The Chair indicated that the Secretariat would endeavour to circulate presentations the day before they were to be delivered in order to

enable those who might not be able to connect at a certain time to be aware of the information being shared with the Informal Advisory Committee and to provide their feedback.

13. A representative of the Secretariat introduced the documents for the meeting. She explained that the report on the Biosafety Clearing-House ([CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/11/2](#)) was the main working document for the meeting and contained different sections for the different items on the agenda. She indicated that information document [CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/11/INF/1](#) contained the revised offline common formats for the BCH to be further discussed under item 3. She noted that two documents for the third meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation had also been made available to inform deliberations under item 6 on post-2020 processes and the BCH. These were the notes by the Executive Secretary on the knowledge management component of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework ([CBD/SBI/3/8/Add.1](#)) and on the implementation plan and capacity-building action plan for the Cartagena Protocol ([CBD/SBI/3/18](#)). Finally, she drew the attention of the Committee to the needs assessment survey report that had been prepared by the UNEP-GEF BCH III project in collaboration with the Secretariat.⁴

14. In addition to the points presented under each agenda item below, the Committee's recommendations are summarized in annex I below.

ITEM 3. MIGRATION OF THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE

15. Under this agenda item, the Committee heard a number of presentations by the Secretariat on the migration of the BCH as well as demonstrations of the new platform. The presentations were based on the activities and steps set out in the chronogram for the migration, which had been requested by the Parties to the Protocol in decision [CP-VIII/2](#) and issued by the Secretariat in July 2019.¹

16. The presentations and demonstrations included: (a) an introduction to the BCH migration; (b) an overview of the work done on migrating the "submit" function of the BCH, i.e. the common formats, including the national reports; (c) live demonstrations of the "submit" and "search" interfaces of the new platform, especially the new features that will be available; and (d) information on the status of work of the other activities in the chronogram plus conclusions and next steps.

17. In the introductory presentation, the Secretariat outlined the background to the migration and highlights of the work done to date following the activities set out in the chronogram. The Secretariat shared some of the challenges that were faced during the migration process, such as the lack of a dedicated officer for the BCH, the competing priorities for the Information Technology Unit, and the added complexity of undertaking the migration in such a way as to increase consistency with the other clearing-houses administered by the Secretariat, as required by the joint modalities of operation of the clearing-house mechanism under the Convention, the BCH and the Access and Benefit-Sharing Clearing-House (ABS-CH) under the Nagoya Protocol. Through the presentation, the Secretariat also highlighted the fact that the migration is a complex process that requires internal coordination and support from other actors, as is the case of the BCH focal points and others who participated in the testing, as well as support from such organizations as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the BCH III project.

18. In the presentation on the migration of the common formats, a representative of the Secretariat explained that the migration had provided the opportunity for the common formats to be reviewed and revised to address developments under the Protocol and to improve consistency across the clearing-houses. She provided an overview of the revisions made, including common formats with no changes or only editorial changes, common formats with more substantial changes, new common formats and common formats being retired, and changes in user roles.

19. The representative of the Secretariat emphasized that the work done to date had only addressed the migration of the English versions of the common formats and that they would need to be translated in order

¹ The chronogram was made available on the home page of the BCH (<http://bch.cbd.int>) and announced through [notification 2019-063](#), issued on 25 July 2019.

for the new BCH platform to function in the six official languages of the United Nations, as is the case with the current BCH.

20. A representative of the Secretariat provided a live demonstration of the “submit” interface on the new BCH, highlighting the new features that are already available as well as those that are under development and will be available when the migration is completed. More specifically, the presentation focused on key new elements of the “submit” interface designed to facilitate the data submission process in the new platform, including the “dashboard”, various new enhanced features of the submission form, workflow process, capability of updating country profiles, description of various tabs allowing easy management of records and generation of reports.

21. A representative of the Secretariat provided a live demonstration of the “search” interface and its key features, including the display of search results. During the demonstration, it was emphasized that the “search” interface in the new BCH was the most advanced that had been built by the Secretariat and that interface has undergone considerable changes compared to the old BCH. It was explained that the search interface had been developed to follow the same design (front-end) and back-end as the search interface in the ABS-CH. The demonstration showed how the new “search” function allows a global search of the whole BCH database. In addition, it was demonstrated how sub-filters are used to perform the multi-level search to enable more detailed searches within the categories of data in the common formats. Furthermore, it was explained that it is possible to combine the global search filters with different sub-filters for several record types. The presentation also included the demonstration of the display of search results in various views such as list, group and matrix.

22. The Secretariat also provided information on the other activities from the chronogram that had not been addressed in the presentations, including the testing of the new platform, the development of the BCH training site, development of new record functionalities, migration of forums for online discussions and development of help pages for the new BCH. The presentation also addressed conclusions and next steps on the migration.

23. Following each presentation and demonstration, the Informal Advisory Committee had the opportunity to ask questions, make comments and provide feedback and advice.

24. The Committee expressed appreciation for the work done on the migration to date and the significant progress that had been made. The Committee recognized that the new BCH already had some useful features, such as the new “matrix” application that would allow users to display data in different ways that might serve their needs better.

25. The Committee noted the challenges experienced by the Secretariat in undertaking the migration and recognized the complexities of the project. Acknowledging the renewed commitments from the Secretariat to the migration and overall BCH work, it was suggested that the Secretariat should review staffing needs to ensure the timely migration and proper functioning of the BCH from both a substantive and information technology perspective.

26. The Committee recommended that the Secretariat should provide Parties, other Governments and relevant stakeholders with an update and revised chronogram on progress towards the migration of the BCH.

27. The Committee discussed the idea of a common format related to synthetic biology. It was noted that synthetic biology is an issue under the Convention on Biological Diversity rather than the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. It was also indicated that the common formats on “living modified organism” and “organism” had been revised to include options related to new scientific and technological developments so Parties are able to publish records of organisms that fall under the definition of “living modified organism” in the Cartagena Protocol, resulting from the application of newly developed techniques.

28. A suggestion was made that there might be a need for the development of additional common formats related to the Nagoya – Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress. It was explained that the development of the common format on competent authorities for the Supplementary

Protocol had been prioritized in response to decision [CP-9/15](#) and the possible development of additional common formats would need to be explored further.

29. A question was raised concerning the use of interactive maps as means to display information. The Secretariat clarified that the use of maps was a complex matter given the sensitivities around the geographical representation of national territories and boundaries, and the Secretariat needed to consider that matter further in the light of additional guidance recently received from UNEP.

30. In response to a question regarding changes made to the common format on “Country’s decision or other communication, notification or declaration” and the section on unintentional transboundary movements, the Committee agreed that it would be useful to include an optional field to provide information on the place where the occurrence or release occurred.

31. The Committee suggested to include a function to enable the export of draft records so that they can be shared with others to collect input and also a function for exporting the record of discussions from online forums.

32. The Informal Advisory Committee expressed its appreciation for the training videos that had been produced by the Secretariat as part of the external testing process, as well as other interactive online help tools already embedded in the new platform, such as “chat”, pop-up descriptive texts and visual tooltip help, and considered them to be good tools for training and capacity-building. It recommended further development of explanatory videos and similar online tools in different sections of the new BCH, for example visual tooltip for sorting arrows in the “matrix” views of the “search” interface. The Committee advised the Secretariat to consider further development of online help materials and training modules on the new BCH platform. It also emphasized that there will be a need for training on the new platform and that the training site should be made available at the same time as the new BCH is launched and in-country training sessions should also be undertaken as requested.

33. The Committee emphasized the importance of maintaining interoperability of the BCH with national websites, referring to the use of the AJAX Plug-in and Hermes national website tools that enable the national BCHs to replicate information from the Central Portal of the BCH. The Committee noted that Hermes would only be supported for an interim period, and that a new tool, Bioland (<https://demo.chm-cbd.net>) would be made available for countries that currently used Hermes. The Committee advised that information should be shared regarding future plans to phase out the Hermes tool and that countries using the Hermes tool might need assistance to migrate their websites before the tool was phased out.

34. As part of the presentation on conclusions and the work that remained to be done to complete the migration, a question was raised as to whether the online forums need to be migrated to the new BCH or whether they could be integrated into the CBD website along with the rest of the substantive pages on the Protocol. The Committee suggested that the new BCH should have the function to host online forums; however, it agreed that the migration of that function did not need to be completed in order to launch the new platform. The Committee also indicated that previous online forums could be archived as static HTML to simplify the task of migration.

35. The Committee discussed the issue of translation of the new BCH into the six official languages of the United Nations and recognized the importance of that task. The members noted that the translation exercise is complex and would likely take considerable time to be completed. In that light, the Committee suggested that the Secretariat start with the translation of the common formats and then move towards the translation of other parts of the platform. The Committee recommended that at least the common formats should be available in the six official languages by the time the new BCH is launched and recognized that other parts of the platform might initially be available in English only and work on translating the other parts would continue after the launch.

ITEM 4. STATUS OF THE CURRENT BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE

36. The Secretariat made a presentation on the operation of the BCH on its current platform (<https://bch.cbd.int>). The presentation included information on the activities undertaken by the Secretariat

towards the management of the BCH, such as the number of records published in the BCH as of October 2020, as well as information arising from the fourth assessment and review of the Protocol and the final evaluation of the Strategic Plan, which had been undertaken in the current intersessional period. During the presentation the Secretariat also referred to the recommendation made by the Informal Advisory Committee at its previous meeting to collaborate with developers of living modified organisms to assign temporary unique identifiers to commercialized living modified animals.

37. After the presentation, the Informal Advisory Committee was invited to discuss and provide feedback on the information presented.

38. The Committee indicated that, as there were currently no unique identifiers for living modified animals, it would be useful if the Secretariat could develop temporary unique identifiers for those living modified organisms in consultation with developers. Recognizing the importance of having a unique identifier that is widely used and is permanent, the Committee suggested that discussions with OECD should continue with the aim of assessing the possibility for OECD to develop those unique identifiers in the near future.

39. Some questions were raised concerning the analytics of information contributed by countries and organizations and the most accessed information through the BCH. The Secretariat explained that analytics information was not easily available on the current BCH; however, additional features would be available on the new platform to facilitate that kind of analysis. The Secretariat demonstrated some of these new features, including the “matrix” view for displaying search results, the “overview” function under “country profiles” and the “reports” tab on the “submit” interface.

ITEM 5. COLLABORATION WITH THE UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME – GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE III CAPACITY-BUILDING PROJECT

40. Under this agenda item, a representative of the UNEP-GEF BCH III Project made a presentation on the status and work of the Project. Information was also presented on collaborative activities undertaken between the Project and the Secretariat.

41. The members of the Informal Advisory Committee expressed their appreciation for the UNEP-GEF BCH III project. The Committee recognized the extensive work undertaken by the project and commended the project for the national and regional workshops that have played an important role in national activities on biosafety and the BCH.

42. Representatives of other organizations were also invited to share information on the work that they had done and its relationship with the BCH. A statement was read out on behalf of the representative of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), reiterating the organization’s commitment to continued cooperation with the Secretariat of the Convention on the BCH and the FAO GM Foods Platform. OECD shared information on its work on biosafety as well as the safety of food and feed derived from LMOs, including the OECD BioTrack Product Database, which contained information on approved LMOs.

ITEM 6. POST-2020 PROCESSES AND THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE

43. Under this agenda item, a representative of the Secretariat made a presentation on the knowledge management component of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework (CBD/SBI/3/8/Add.1). He gave an overview of the proposed elements of the knowledge management component and highlighted the strategies that were being proposed to enhance knowledge management in the context of the post-2020 process.

44. The Committee reflected on the knowledge management component of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and expressed general support for the further development of the document. Comments were made concerning the importance of ensuring the necessary cross-referencing between the CHM, BCH and ABS-CH for cross-cutting topics. It was also stressed that users should have easy ways of identifying information relevant to their needs and where to access that information. Another consideration concerned the criteria for topics/information to be included within the scope of knowledge management.

The Committee also commented on the unique nature of biosafety considerations, the role of transparency in contributing to legal certainty and the need for Parties to maintain the accuracy of information published in the BCH. The members were invited to make further written inputs to the Secretariat.

45. A representative of the Secretariat also gave a presentation on the draft implementation plan and capacity-building action plan for the Protocol, in particular how the BCH had been addressed in the draft plans (CBD/SBI/3/18). She also made reference to the biosafety target in the draft post-2020 global biodiversity framework and the linkages among that target, the implementation plan, the capacity-building action plan and the long-term strategic framework on capacity development.

ITEM 7. OTHER MATTERS

46. No other matters were raised.

ITEM 8. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

47. The Chair introduced the draft report of the Committee, which was adopted as orally amended.

ITEM 9. CLOSURE OF THE MEETING

48. The Committee expressed its appreciation to the Secretariat for the organization of the virtual meeting and acknowledged the impressive and significant work that the Secretariat had devoted to the migration of the BCH to its new platform.

49. The eleventh meeting of the Informal Advisory Committee was closed at 3.15 pm GMT/UTC on 4 December 2020.

Annex I

**RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE INFORMAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE
BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE AT ITS ELEVENTH MEETING**

The Informal Advisory Committee on the Biosafety Clearing-House recommends that the Secretariat:

1. Review its staffing needs to ensure the proper functioning of the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) from both a substantive and information technology perspective;
2. Provide an update to Parties, other Governments and relevant stakeholders on progress towards the migration of the BCH;
3. Include in the common format on “Country’s decision or other communication, notification or declaration” an optional field to provide information on the place where an unintentional transboundary movement occurred;
4. Include a function that enables the export of draft records so that they can be shared with others to collect input as well as a function for exporting the record of discussions from online forums;
5. Develop further the explanatory videos and similar online tools to demonstrate various features on different sections of the new BCH (e.g. visual tooltip for sorting arrows in the “matrix” views of the “search” interface);
6. Consider further development of online help materials and training modules on the new BCH platform, taking into consideration the needs of Parties for capacity-building arising from the new BCH platform;
7. Make national website tools available to allow interoperability with the new BCH platform and take into account national migration requirements and inform countries of the plans and timeline for the phase-out of Hermes;
8. Migrate the function for hosting online forums to the new BCH;
9. Archive the previous online forums as static HTML;
10. Carry out the translation of the common formats and make them available in the six official languages of the United Nations by the time the new BCH is launched;
11. Continue the migration process to its completion and the launch of the new BCH platform even if the function for hosting online forums is not yet available and parts of the platform other than the common formats are available only in English;
12. Develop temporary unique identifiers for living modified animals falling under the scope of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in consultation with developers when information about such living modified organisms is submitted to the BCH and taking into account existing procedures when available;
13. Continue discussions with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with the aim of assessing the possibility for OECD to develop permanent unique identifiers for living modified animals in the near future;
14. Continue collaborating and exploring possibilities for facilitating information-sharing between BCH, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and OECD databases and other relevant databases in the longer term.

Annex II

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