



Convention on Biological Diversity

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INFORMAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE

Twelfth meeting

Montreal, Canada, 15–16 May 2023

Agenda item 9

Report of the Informal Advisory Committee on the Biosafety Clearing-House on its twelfth meeting

Introduction

A. Background

1. Under Article 20, paragraph 1, of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity, a Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) was established 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) assist Parties to implement the Protocol.
2. In accordance with the modalities of operation of the Biosafety Clearing-House contained in the annex to decision [BS-I/3](#) of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol, the twelfth meeting of the Informal Advisory Committee on the Biosafety Clearing-House was convened to review the progress made since its previous meeting, held in December 2020.
3. The twelfth meeting was held on 15 and 16 May 2023 at the office of the Secretariat of the Convention, in Montreal, Canada.

B. Attendance

4. The meeting was attended by the members of the Informal Advisory Committee from the following Parties to the Cartagena Protocol: Belarus, Ecuador, Germany, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Republic of Moldova, Senegal, Serbia, Tunisia, Türkiye and Uruguay. The meeting was also attended by a representative of the United States of America and by members of the following organizations: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Environment Programme-Global Environment Facility Biosafety Clearing-House III Capacity-Building Project (UNEP-GEF BCH III Project).
5. The members from Jamaica and the European Network for Ecological Reflection and Action (Ecoropa) were unable to attend the meeting. The member from CropLife International participated online and on 16 May 2023 only, to make a presentation on the collaboration of her organization with the Secretariat.

Item 1. Opening of the meeting

6. The Acting Head of the Implementation Support Division opened the meeting at 9 a.m. on 15 May 2023, on behalf of the Acting Executive Secretary of the Secretariat of the Convention. He welcomed the participants to the meeting and thanked the members for coming to Montreal to participate in the

discussions. He acknowledged the central role of the BCH in the implementation and operation of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and as a strategic information-sharing mechanism to support the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. He referred to the completion of the migration of the BCH to its new platform in November 2021 and to the post-migration statistics, which indicated that the new platform was a success. He highlighted the main training and capacity-building activities that had been carried out by the Secretariat on the new platform since its launch. He also stressed the importance of the role of the Informal Advisory Committee in providing advice to the Executive Secretary and in making recommendations for the ongoing development of the BCH. Affirming the responsibility of the Secretariat in managing and maintaining the platform, he expressed his appreciation to the Committee members for their continuous support in this regard.

Item 2. Organizational matters

2.1. Election of officers

7. The Informal Advisory Committee elected Tim Strabala as Chair of the meeting.

2.2. Adoption of the agenda

8. On the basis of the provisional agenda prepared by the Secretariat,¹ 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. Status of the Biosafety Clearing-House: latest developments and current and planned activities.
4. Decisions adopted at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol relating to the Biosafety Clearing-House.
5. Collaboration on the United Nations Environment Programme-Global Environment Facility Biosafety Clearing-House III Capacity-Building Project.
6. Collaboration with biosafety-related organizations.
7. Other matters.
8. Conclusions and recommendations.
9. Adoption of the report.
10. Closure of the meeting.

2.3. Organization of work

9. The Informal Advisory Committee approved the organization of work as provided in annex I to the annotated provisional agenda.²

¹ [CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/12/1](#).

² [CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/12/1/Add.1](#).

10. A representative of the Secretariat introduced the documents for the meeting. He explained that the report on the Biosafety Clearing-House³ was the main working document and contained separate sections for each of agenda items 3 to 6.

Item 3. Status of the Biosafety Clearing-House: latest developments and current and planned activities

11. The Secretariat provided information on the current status of records available on the BCH and on relevant activities undertaken since the previous meeting of the Informal Advisory Committee. Presentations included updates on: (a) efforts made towards completing the migration of the BCH to its new platform and its launch in November 2021, and actions taken with regard to recommendations made by the Committee at its eleventh meeting; (b) the current status of various records in the BCH; (c) work undertaken since the launch to improve the new platform, including new features and functionalities; (d) work undertaken to establish linkages between the BCH and national websites; (e) training and capacity-building activities carried out by the Secretariat on the BCH; (f) current development activities with regard to the BCH; and (g) future developments and next steps.

12. The Committee took note of the progress made with respect to the recommendations adopted at its eleventh meeting. In particular, members noted the importance of maintaining accurate and high-quality information in the BCH. Comments were also made regarding the need for a more comprehensive analysis of user interaction with the BCH. Such information was considered useful in obtaining a better understanding of the user experience and enhancing the effectiveness of the BCH as a whole.

13. Comments were made regarding the need to enhance the notification system on the BCH, in particular in relation to when changes were made to linked national and reference records. Some members suggested that a notification be shared with all users who had been consulted on the preparation of draft records once such records were published. The Secretariat said that this would be possible when drafts were shared by email among BCH account holders. In that regard, it was clarified that there was no limit to the number of accounts that could be registered for the sharing of draft information in the BCH.

14. The Committee expressed its appreciation for the new features and functionalities available on the new platform, including the “Share” feature. It was suggested that the possibility for users to include personalized messages when sharing BCH content by email would be useful. The Committee, however, highlighted the need for specific efforts in terms of capacity-building and training for users. To that end, suggestions were made for additional training tools to be developed and rolled out.

15. The Committee also welcomed the improved search functionality and the opportunity to obtain national information through the “Country Profiles” page, as well as comparative information on risk assessments and decisions made on living modified organisms.

16. With regard to the work conducted to serve national websites, the Committee considered the role previously played by the Ajax plug-in and noted the potential restrictions that national websites may have for embedding foreign code. Some members raised concerns regarding accessibility and system requirements for the “Embed” functionality. In response, the Secretariat clarified that a webpage was needed to embed the content, that the BCH source code was open source and that the Secretariat could provide technical details to Parties upon request.

17. The Committee also welcomed the presentation on the Bioland tool and considered its usefulness for integrating national systems into the clearing-house mechanism, the Access and Benefit-sharing Clearing-House and the BCH. The Committee emphasized that Bioland was a tool used on a voluntary basis by those Parties that needed it and that it could be customized for use at the national or regional level. A representative of the UNEP-GEF BCH III Project emphasized that, during training activities conducted

³ [CBD/CP/BCH-IAC/12/2](#).

under the Project, countries were provided with various options from which they could select the approach best suited to their capacities.

18. The Committee expressed its appreciation for the training and capacity-building materials available on the new platform and suggested that the “Help” menu in the main navigation bar lead to a specific landing page that described the help material available.

19. The Committee also discussed the scope of the scientific information within the BCH. With regard to the ongoing discussions on new genome techniques, it was noted that Parties updated their national laws as the need arose.

20. With regard to translations, the Committee stressed the importance of providing various parts of the BCH into all six languages of the United Nations. Elements of the main navigation bar, various buttons, announcements and global filters were highlighted as important components requiring translation. The Secretariat clarified the limitations in relation to the translation of “Announcements” pages, but the translation of other portions of the site was ongoing.

21. With regard to current development activities related to the BCH, the Committee noted with appreciation the creation of a landing page for submissions in response to notifications, emphasizing the importance of the submission process for enhancing transparency.

22. The Committee also welcomed the work conducted on forums hosted on the new platform. The members highlighted the usefulness of being able to export forum discussions. In addition, it was suggested that summaries of online forums be posted directly on the related forum page. The Committee expressed interest in exploring the possibility to further enhance the analysis information submitted through the online forum by using data-mining techniques and tools. It also discussed reviving the BCH Informal Advisory Committee forum.

23. With regard to forthcoming developments with the BCH, the Committee suggested that the export function allow users to select specific fields in the downloaded file. The Secretariat explained that, while it would be possible, it would require substantial time and resources in terms of information technology. It was suggested that the export include all mandatory fields, which users could then customize as needed.

24. The Committee highlighted the importance of shifting the focus to recording accuracy and completeness post-migration. The members expressed their appreciation for the ongoing work of the Secretariat in reminding Parties to ensure that their records in the BCH were accurate, complete and up to date.

25. The Committee also discussed mechanisms to keep information up to date in the BCH, including by using the “Report” button. It was suggested that the button be made more prominent and that its use be promoted through help materials.

26. The Committee reflected on the implementation of the time frame confirmation and on its role in ensuring that information is regularly reviewed and updated by Parties. In this regard, the members suggested that the time frame confirmation initially focus on records that were most relevant.

27. The Committee discussed the issue of record versioning related to linkages among records in the BCH. It was suggested that, for records containing contact information, including contact records and competent national authority, only the most recent version be displayed.

Item 4. Decisions adopted at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol relating to the Biosafety Clearing-House

28. The Secretariat made presentations on the following topics in the context of the BCH: (a) the Implementation Plan and the Capacity-building Action Plan for the Cartagena Protocol, which were adopted at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention serving as the meeting of the Parties

to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety through decisions CP-10/3 and CP-10/4, respectively; (b) an update on the status of the knowledge management component of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework; and (c) the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework: planning, monitoring and reporting. In reference to the Implementation Plan for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the Informal Advisory Committee acknowledged the extensive programme of work on the BCH and noted the importance of prioritizing mandatory information as an indicator for implementation.

29. The Committee emphasized the importance of ensuring alignment with reporting under the Convention and acknowledged the important role of the BCH as a data source to support the achievement of Target 17 in relation to the implementation of the monitoring framework for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The Committee heard a briefing on the development of the indicators for the target and reiterated the important role that the BCH would play as a data source and means of validation of biosafety-related data. In addition, the Committee noted the relevance of the BCH to the core elements outlined in Target 21.

Item 5. Collaboration on the United Nations Environment Programme-Global Environment Facility Biosafety Clearing-House III Capacity-Building Project

30. A representative of the UNEP-GEF BCH III Project made a presentation on the status and work of the Project and its future plans.

31. The Committee expressed its deep appreciation for the UNEP-GEF BCH III Project and its work. It recognized the extensive work undertaken under the Project and commended it for the national and regional workshops that it had held and that had played an important role in national activities on biosafety and the BCH.

32. The Informal Advisory Committee stressed the need for ongoing capacity-building support for Parties and the potential need for ongoing capacity-building after the conclusion of the UNEP-GEF BCH III Project, at the end of 2024, as well as for a continued mechanism to support the Regional Advisors Network. The Committee also highlighted the next steps for capacity-building, which would address how Parties could interpret and use the information at the regional level. It also discussed how the Bioland tool could support regional capacity-building.

Item 6. Collaboration with biosafety-related organizations

33. Representatives of other organizations were invited to share information on the work that they had conducted in relation to the BCH, as well as on their collaboration with the Secretariat. To introduce the item, a representative of the Secretariat made a brief presentation on the status of scientific records (living modified organisms, genetic elements and organisms) in the BCH and how various databases managed by partner organizations were used in the BCH. This was followed by presentations by the representatives of OECD; FAO; the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety of Germany, on linkages between the European GMO Initiative for a Unified Database System (Euginius) and the BCH; and CropLife International, on its work related to its Detection Methods Database and BioTradeStatus.

34. The Informal Advisory Committee congratulated the Secretariat on the work that had been achieved in improving the scientific information in the BCH and discussed whether certain elements should be considered for inclusion in the BCH, such as digital sequence information on genetic resources, automated linkages to pertinent patent information and improving the mechanism for sharing information on living modified organisms among databases. Concerns were raised regarding the potential duplication of information available from other databases, and it was reiterated that the core role of the BCH was to support Parties in implementing the Cartagena Protocol. The Committee said that statistical tools could be used to better display and communicate information on the BCH.

35. The Committee welcomed the presentations, expressed its appreciation for the work of the various organizations concerned, including their ongoing collaboration with the BCH, and encouraged the continuation of those activities. The Committee also acknowledged the different mandates and scope of each

database. It was recognized that the BCH should remain within its scope and mandate, reduce redundancies and avoid duplicative work, where possible.

36. In addition, the Committee welcomed the work conducted by OECD regarding the possibility to develop a system for the assignment of permanent unique identifiers to living modified animals.

Item 7. Other matters

37. The Informal Advisory Committee raised the issues of the privacy of contact information (e.g. names, emails and phone numbers) and of whether this type of information should be made available to the general public in online databases, such as the BCH. Members highlighted the different policies at the national level and reflected on the challenges to protect personal information that had to be provided under the current modalities of operation of the BCH.

Item 8. Conclusions and recommendations

38. The Chair briefly summarized the results of the discussions.

Item 9. Adoption of the report

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

Item 10. Closure of the meeting

40. The Informal Advisory Committee expressed its appreciation to the Secretariat for organizing the meeting and acknowledged the impressive and significant work that the Secretariat had devoted to the various activities related to the BCH since the launch of its new platform.

41. The twelfth meeting of the Committee was closed at 6.28 p.m. on 16 May 2023.

Annex I

**Recommendations adopted by the Informal Advisory Committee
on the Biosafety Clearing-House at its twelfth meeting**

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

- (a) Continue to translate the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) to ensure its availability in all six languages of the United Nations;
- (b) Undertake a process for the phase-out of Hermes, starting with a scoping phase entailing user experience research to identify new information architecture and functionalities of the BCH national websites;
- (c) Create a registry of laboratories for the detection and identification of records on living modified organisms to provide prominence to the important role played by those laboratories;
- (d) Continue to encourage submissions through the BCH, as appropriate;
- (e) Conduct an analysis on how the BCH could contribute to the monitoring framework for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, including through registries and national reports;
- (f) Monitor discussions and developments regarding personal identifiable information;
- (g) Provide Parties, other Governments and relevant stakeholders with an updated -chronogram of the migration of the BCH to its new platform.

Recommendations related to forums and online discussions

- (h) Host future forums and online discussions related to the Cartagena Protocol through the new BCH platform;
- (i) Build a simple, user-friendly “Portals and forums” landing page on the new platform;
- (j) Continue to improve the functionality of forums, including by allowing for rich text entries, creating a centralized location for all attachments received through the forum and adding the ability to quote other messages in the forum;
- (k) Create additional help materials related to forums, including an article in the Knowledge Base and an onboarding tour;
- (l) Make the summary documentation on the forum directly available on the forum page and include a function for exporting the record of discussions from online forums;
- (m) Create a dedicated forum for the Informal Advisory Committee on the new platform of the BCH.

Recommendations related to new record functionalities

- (n) Continue to develop the “Export” feature in the search in order to make additional fields in each common format available;
- (o) Enable users to add a personalized message to recipients when sharing content from the BCH by email;
- (p) Improve the notifications that users receive from the BCH, including: (i) notifying recipients of shared drafts when a record has been published; and (ii) notifying the owner of a record when another record that they have linked to has been edited or deleted;
- (q) Enhance record maintenance functionality to support Parties in keeping their records accurate, complete and up to date.

Recommendations related to capacity-building and training

(r) Include a landing page for the “Help” functionality that details the various help material available for the BCH;

(s) Include clear instructions on the training site that provide guidance on how to be granted specific practice roles;

(t) Continue to develop new help materials, including webinars, articles in the Knowledge Base, onboarding tours and short videos on specific newly updated BCH functions and features;

(u) Maximize the output from the UNEP-GEF BCH III Project until its conclusion and explore ways to support and institutionalize the Regional Advisors Network in the continuation of its current role.

Recommendations related to collaborations with other organizations

(v) Conduct a joint mapping exercise to explore the potential coordination of the modified trait categories among the databases of the BCH, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD);

(w) Participate in discussions with OECD on the possibility to develop a system for the assignment of permanent unique identifiers to living modified animals;

(x) Continue to collaborate and explore possibilities for facilitating information-sharing and linkages among the BCH, FAO and OECD databases, the European GMO Initiative for a Unified Database System (EUGenius) and other relevant databases in the longer term, within the BCH scope and mandate;

(y) Support further institutional collaboration with other organizations, such as FAO, with a view to sharing information through webinars on database scope and utilization.

Annex II

List of participants

A. Parties

Africa

Nigeria

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Release
National Biosafety Management Agency

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Ana Laura Mello
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Western Europe and Others

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Türkiye

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B. Other Governments

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C. Organizations

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Masami Takeuchi
Food Safety Officer

CropLife International

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International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology

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