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INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEE FOR THE CARTAGENA PROTOCOL ON BIOSAFETY

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INFORMATION-SHARING

Progress report on the development and implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House

Note by the Executive Secretary

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Article 20 of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity establishes a Biosafety Clearing-House to facilitate the exchange of information on living modified organisms (LMOs) and to assist countries in the implementation of the Protocol.
2. The Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP) held its first meeting in Montpellier, France, from 11 to 15 December 2000, and recommended the development of a pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House. It defined the objectives of the pilot phase as follows: i) to build experience and provide feedback for the development of a functional and accessible Internet based Biosafety Clearing-House, and to identify alternatives to the electronic system ; and, ii) to identify and address capacity needs of countries with respect to the Biosafety Clearing-House (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/1/9, annex I).
3. The Intergovernmental Committee also highlighted the following characteristics for the pilot phase:
 - (a) It must be amenable to rapid development;
 - (b) It must be user-friendly, searchable and understandable;
 - (c) It must provide an efficient mechanism for implementation of the requirements of the Protocol; and

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(d) It must incorporate on a priority basis information to facilitate decision-making, including that required under the Advance Informed Agreement (AIA) procedure.

4. Furthermore, the Intergovernmental Committee identified the following elements required to implement the pilot phase:

- (a) A central portal;
- (b) Central database(s) that contain(s) at a minimum:
 - (i) Information from countries without a national database (e.g. information in accordance with Article 20, paragraph 3 (a), of the Protocol);
 - (ii) Information sent from countries without an electronic infrastructure (e.g. information in accordance with Article 10, paragraph 3, and Article 20, paragraphs (c) and (d) of the Protocol);
 - (iii) Information required to implement Article 11, paragraph 1;
 - (iv) Searchable indexes of information to facilitate decision-making, including that required under the Advance Informed Agreement procedure;
- (c) Linkage of central portal to national, regional and international databases/nodes;
- (d) Common formats for information, which can incorporate linked information through appropriate search engines.

5. Finally, the Committee recommended a project plan to ensure the timely implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House and requested the Executive Secretary to develop a work plan for completion of all tasks defined in the project plan in a timeframe that would allow for relevant consideration by the Committee at its second meeting.

6. The present note was prepared by the Executive Secretary to inform the second meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee on progress in the implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House, based on the objectives, characteristics, elements, modalities and timeframes recommended by the Committee at its first meeting. The note covers activities by the Secretariat up to 15 July 2001. The Committee may wish to note that there will be an addendum to the present note to report on matters related to monitoring and review of the pilot phase, pursuant to the request of the Committee in this regard (see para. 26 below).

II. PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PILOT PHASE

A. Development of the central portal and the central database

7. At its first meeting, the ICCP mandated its Bureau to draw upon appropriate technical advisory expertise to facilitate the development of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/1/9, annex I). In response to this recommendation, and in order to assist the Bureau in the discharge of this mandate, the Executive Secretary convened a liaison group meeting of technical experts on the Biosafety Clearing-House, which was held in Montreal from 19 to 20 March 2001, to provide advice on technical issues associated with the implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House.

8. At its meeting held in Montreal on 21 March 2001, immediately following the meeting of the liaison group, the Bureau of the ICCP endorsed the liaison group's recommendations and mandated the Secretariat to proceed with the development of the pilot phase along the lines of those recommendations.

9. Immediately following these meetings, the Secretariat started to implement the BCH pilot phase and develop a central portal and central database. The required hardware and software were purchased with funds provided by the Governments of the United States and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Consequently, the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House was launched online on 5 April 2001 as a test website (<http://bch.biodiv.org>). It uses metadata descriptors with controlled vocabularies to facilitate information-searching and sharing and to improve its understandability. It also provides a feedback mechanism where users are able to send comments for improvements to the Secretariat.

10. In line with the elements identified by ICCP at its first meeting, the central database contains the following types of information: national laws, regulations and guidelines; bilateral, regional, and multilateral agreements and arrangements; decisions under Article 10, paragraph 3, and Article 11, paragraph 1, of the Protocol; risk assessment reports; searchable indexes of information to facilitate decision-making including that required under the AIA procedure. This information is accessible either directly or indirectly through appropriate links to other databases.

B. Linkage of central portal to national, regional and international databases/nodes

11. To date, a number of biosafety-relevant national, regional and international databases have been identified and links to them from the Biosafety Clearing-House central portal have been established where it was appropriate. These links include the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC), the American Biological Safety Association (ABSA), Information Systems for Biotechnology, the Centre for Research on Genetic Resources and Plant Biotechnology (CIRGEBV), Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Other relevant databases have been identified, and linkages with them are in being put in place.

C. Common formats for information

12. As of now, the following two common formats for information have been developed, reviewed by the Bureau at its meeting held on 21 March 2001 and thereafter included in the central portal of the pilot phase to be used by countries for developing their own national databases or for submitting data to the Secretariat for inclusion in the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House: (i) common format for the movement of living modified organisms intended for direct use as food or feed, or for processing, under Article 11 of the Protocol; and (ii) common format for biosafety laws, regulations and guidelines.

13. The Secretariat has developed two other common formats, namely: a common format for movement of living modified organisms under the Advance Informed Agreement procedure; and a common format for bilateral, regional and multilateral agreements and arrangements. These common formats were considered by the Bureau at its meeting held on 9-10 July 2001 in Havana. These common formats are currently being finalized on the basis of the comments provided by the Bureau and will also be posted online by the Secretariat in the Biosafety Clearing-House central portal, for comments or for use by participating countries, as appropriate.

D. Development of the Biosafety Clearing-House tool-kit

14. At its meeting on 21 March 2001, the Bureau recommended that the Secretariat develop a tool-kit to serve as an informative and instructional tool to explain the Protocol in relation to the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House to interested users and to assist them in the use of the pilot phase. It will also assist in the establishment of national databases based on the common formats, and in the preparation of guidelines and templates for the input of data. In accordance with the recommendation, the Secretariat has developed a draft tool-kit, which will soon be distributed to participating countries for comments. It will be available in paper, CD-ROM and web formats, and made available online on the Biosafety Clearing-House central portal. The CD-ROM and the web versions were designed as interactive instruction modules that illustrate and simulate the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House to facilitate learning of the Biosafety Clearing-House information-sharing tools.

15. The tool-kit also includes the interoperability standards/guidelines for the pilot-phase database, which were conveyed to cooperating organizations, in particular OECD, UNIDO and ICGEB. Database developers can follow these standards to establish national databases or to make the existing national databases interoperable with the Biosafety Clearing-House database.

E. Cooperation with relevant international organizations

16. At its first meeting, ICCP requested the Executive Secretary to seek the appropriate administrative arrangements with relevant international organizations, such as the OECD and UNIDO, and Governments, to facilitate implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House. The Intergovernmental Committee had also recommended that, during the pilot phase, use is made of existing information systems, such as the ICGEB database and the OECD/UNIDO databases, including the product database, as models for implementing the obligations under Article 10 and Article 11, paragraph 1, of the Protocol.

17. In response to this recommendation and on the basis of further criteria for partnership identified by the Bureau at its meeting of 21 March 2001, the Secretariat developed draft memoranda of cooperation and draft interoperability standards/guidelines for the Biosafety Clearing-House pilot phase database, which were conveyed to OECD, UNIDO and ICGEB in early May 2001 for their consideration. The reaction from the three organizations has been positive and discussions are now at a final stage with a view to signing the memoranda to formalize cooperation between the Secretariat and these organizations with regard to the development of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House.

F. Alternatives to a Web-based information-sharing system

18. Following the recommendation from the first meeting of ICCP, which highlighted the identification of alternatives to the electronic system as one of the objectives for the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House, the Secretariat has identified the following options for non-electronic information exchange mechanisms: (i) production of printed and CD-ROM/diskette directories with circulation of regular updates; (ii) selective dissemination of information responding to requests made by phone, fax, mail; and (iii) general reference services through regional help desks and other online information centres.

19. The Secretariat has also identified two options for non-Web-based but electronic information exchange mechanisms: (i) automated document distribution systems (processing requests made by phone, fax, electronic mail); and (ii) availability of information via Internet protocols in addition to the website, such as File Transfer Protocol (FTP), and e-mail.

20. Systems for these alternative mechanisms have already been identified, and their implementation will be country-based and needs driven, in line with the recommendation made by of the Bureau.

G. Access to the roster of experts

21. The Secretariat finalized the development of the nomination form for the biosafety roster of experts on the basis of comments received from governments on the draft nomination form which was distributed at the first meeting of ICCP. Submissions to the roster can be made online through the central portal of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House, faxed or mailed to the Secretariat. The Secretariat has been posting the data received for the biosafety roster of experts into the central database, and the information on the roster of experts is searchable online in the central portal of the pilot phase. However, as final decisions on the operation of this roster have yet to be made by the Intergovernmental Committee, the Bureau recommended that a disclaimer be displayed with regard to the use of the roster. This has been done.

H. Identify and address the capacity needs of countries

22. To identify and address the capacity needs of countries with respect to the Biosafety Clearing-House, the Secretariat prepared a questionnaire: Sample framework questions to aid in determining Parties' needs for capacity building to implement the Biosafety Protocol. This questionnaire was sent out by the Secretariat to all national focal points* on 12 January 2001. The responses received from a number of Governments and regional economic integration organizations as of 30 April 2001 were summarized and made available in the note of the Executive Secretary prepared for the Open-ended Expert Meeting on Capacity-building for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which was held in Havana from 11 to 13 July 2001 (UNEP/CBD/BS/EM-CB/1/2).

23. In addition to the use of the questionnaire to identify capacity-building needs of countries, a series of regional workshops on the Biosafety Clearing-House have been planned in order to provide countries with the opportunity to express their needs and expectations with regard to the establishment of the pilot phase. In this context, a regional workshop for the African countries was held in Nairobi from 26 to 28 February 2001 and the report of this meeting (UNEP/CBD/BCH/Afr.Reg/1/2), which contains the needs identified by the African region, was made available to the Open-ended Expert Meeting on Capacity-building. Regional meetings on the Biosafety Clearing-House for Asia/Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America/Caribbean will be organized in the near future. The Secretariat plans to hold at least one of these meetings before the second meeting of ICCP and, following the offer made by the representative of the Government of Peru during the Open-ended Expert Meeting on Capacity-building to host a meeting on capacity building for countries of the Latin America and Caribbean region, focusing in particular on the Biosafety Clearing-House, arrangements are being made to organize the regional meeting for the Latin American and Caribbean region in early September 2001 in Lima. The Secretariat intends to organize these regional workshops by the end of March 2002. The financial support for these meetings was provided by the Government of the United States of America.

24. Identification of needs of countries for participating in the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House will be a continuing process. After completing the round of regional meetings, mechanisms will be developed to meet identified needs, taking into account the recommendations that will emanate from the other inter-sessional activities related to capacity building, in particular the Havana meeting, and subsequent guidance expected from ICCP at its second meeting.

* That is, ICCP national focal points, and national focal points for the Convention where ICCP focal points have not yet been designated.

I. Languages

25. The pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House is in English. It has been designed, however, to accommodate all six United Nations languages at a later stage. In addition, use of multilingual thesauri will also offer the Biosafety Clearing-House the option of adding search terms as needed.

J. Monitoring and review

26. At its first meeting, the ICCP requested the Executive Secretary to commission an independent and transparent review of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House utilizing feedback from participating countries and indicators to measure success against the objectives of the pilot phase. At its meeting held on 9-10 July 2001 in Havana, the Bureau considered this issue and decided that the independent review of the pilot phase will be conducted after the second meeting of the ICCP. It was the view of the Bureau that the ICCP did not call for such review to be conducted before its second meeting and that the process is at its early stage that does not warrant a separate review from the oversight of a group of technical experts. Instead, the Bureau requested the Secretariat to arrange for a meeting of the liaison group of technical experts on the Biosafety Clearing House in Nairobi at the time of the Open-ended Meeting of Experts on a Compliance Regime under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, to have a technical review of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House and to report to the second meeting of the ICCP. Consequently, the Secretariat is making arrangements for the meeting of the liaison group of technical experts to take place on 27-28 September 2001 in Nairobi and the report of this meeting will be circulated later as an addendum to this note for consideration by the second meeting of ICCP. To the extent possible, the composition of the liaison group will be the same as the group that met on 19-20 March 2001 in Montreal to provide recommendations on technical issues associated with the development and implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House (see also paragraph 7 above).

III. CONCLUSIONS

27. Guided by the principles of inclusiveness, transparency and equity, and following the guidelines and recommendations of ICCP at its first meeting (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/1/9, annex I) and of the Bureau meetings, the Secretariat has endeavoured to implement the pilot phase of Biosafety Clearing-House to meet the objectives of the pilot phase including all the required elements. However, the implementation of the pilot phase is continuing, particularly the development of the central portal, with a view to make it more comprehensive, user-friendly, understandable and searchable, building on the experience gained during its development. Therefore, the Secretariat welcomes comments on the development of the website of the Biosafety Clearing-House pilot phase to assist and facilitate its continuous improvement. All participating countries are encouraged to visit the Biosafety Clearing-House pilot-phase website* and send comments to BCH@biodiv.org.

28. Further development of the pilot phase will depend on the findings of the technical review process. However, without prejudice to this process, it may be anticipated that the following issues will merit special consideration in the next phase of development of the pilot phase:

(a) Mechanisms to meet the capacity-building needs of countries with respect to the Biosafety Clearing-House, based on the already identified capacity needs;

* <http://bch.biodiv.org/bch-bureau-pilot-phase-en.asp>.

(b) Mechanisms to update information posted in the Biosafety Clearing-House central portal and to input data into the Biosafety Clearing-House database directly online by designated authorities without sacrificing transparency, authentication and security needs of the Biosafety Clearing-House pilot phase;

(c) Transition from the Biosafety Clearing-House pilot phase to the development of a fully functional and accessible Internet based Biosafety Clearing-House;

(d) Guidelines for the operation of roster of experts;

(e) Cooperation with other organizations, such as OECD, UNIDO and ICGEB, and national databases.
