UNEP

CBD

CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Distr.
GENERAL

UNEP/CBD/ICCP/3/5
6 March 2002

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
CARTAGENA PROTOCOL ON BIOSAFETY
Third meeting
The Hague, 22-26 April 2002
Item 4.1.3 of the provisional agenda*

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 established 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. At its first meeting, held in Montpellier from 11 to 15 December 2000, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP) recommended the development of a pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House, along the lines of defined objectives, characteristics, elements, modalities and timeframes. ICCP mandated its Bureau to provide management oversight of the development and implementation of the pilot phase, and 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). At its second meeting, held in Nairobi from 1 to 5 October 2001, ICCP recognized that the pilot phase is an ongoing activity being implemented in accordance with the recommendations made at its first meeting, and proposed that the future development of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House be undertaken in accordance with the second note from the Bureau on technical issues associated with the implementation of the pilot phase (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/2/15, recommendation 2/8, para. 1).

3. The pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House is accessible on-line at http://bch.biodiv.org.

* UNEP/CBD/ICCP/3/1.

/…

4. The present note was prepared by the Executive Secretary to inform of the Intergovernmental Committee at its third meeting on progress in the implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House, based on the recommendations made by the Committee at its first and second meetings. The note covers activities by the Secretariat up to 22 February 2002.

5. The Committee may wish to note that there will be a number of addenda to the present note, which are intended:

(a) To report on the outcome of the independent review of the pilot phase, pursuant to the request of the Committee in this regard (see para. 33 below);

(b) To provide a response from the Bureau on the outcome of the independent review (see para. 34 below); and

(c) Following the completion of the round of regional meetings on the Biosafety-Clearing-House, to provide a synthesis of capacity-building needs identified by the regions, with a view to assisting the Intergovernmental Committee consider the possibility of establishing a capacity-building programme addressing those needs (see para. 29 below).

II. PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PILOT PHASE

6. The further development of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House has progressed in line with the recommendations made at the second meeting of the ICCP, and in response to issues identified at the regional capacity-building meetings on the Biosafety Clearing-House, using funds provided by the Governments of the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. These developments have been guided by the principles of inclusiveness, transparency and equity, as identified at the first meeting of the ICCP.

A. Development of the central portal and the central database

Central portal

7. In line with the second technical note from the Bureau (ICCP recommendation 2/8, annex), the central portal uses an interactive site map with explanatory text to better assist in the use and navigation of the Biosafety Clearing-House. Information categories have been reorganized and consolidated where possible, and the following categories are available on the central portal: national contacts (including national focal points; competent national authorities; national databases); laws and regulations (including national laws, regulations and guidelines; regional and international agreements); and decision information (including decisions under the advance informed agreement procedure; decisions under Article 11, paragraph 1; other decisions; risk assessment summaries).

8. Additional categories of information include: capacity-building (including the roster of biosafety experts; the capacity-building projects database); "help" functions (including the tool-kit; frequently asked questions; glossary; site map); "information about this site" (including the disclaimer; an introduction; background notes;); and "news" (including latest additions to the site; meetings; access to notes from the Bureau). The central portal also includes a feedback mechanism where users are able to send comments for improvements to the Secretariat.

Management centre

9. The management centre of the Biosafety Clearing-House has been developed to provide an electronic, Web-based mechanism by which national focal points for the Biosafety Clearing-House can register, modify and/or delete information relating to their country. Following the advice of the Bureau, registration of information through the management centre has been facilitated through the inclusion of automatic defaults for information (such as the country entering the data), by the inclusion of a facility to "import" information from elsewhere in the database, and also through encouraging the use of hyperlinks where possible.

10. In line with ICCP recommendation 2/8, as at 22 February 2002, 16 countries had nominated national focal points for the Biosafety Clearing-House: Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Austria, China, Egypt, Honduras, Malawi, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Pakistan, Slovenia, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Viet Nam.

Central database

11. To ensure compatibility with existing and future initiatives, the central database is being designed in accordance with international standards, such as ISO 3166 (country codes), ISO 639 (language codes), ISO 2788 (thesauri), World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), etc. In addition, the system is being designed with the ability to make future use of taxonomic resources such as Species 2000, the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), and/or the Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS) to provide access to baseline taxonomic data.

Related links

12. An online form has been provided to allow organizations undertaking biosafety-related activities to register relevant websites with the Biosafety Clearing-House, including brief descriptions and metadata. Information available in the "related websites" category has been categorized under the following broad headings: biosafety at other intergovernmental organizations; other organizations and institutions involved in biosafety and biotechnology; risk assessment guidance documents; and specific biosafety databases and journals.

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

13. To date, a number of biosafety-relevant national, regional and international databases have been identified and linked to the Biosafety Clearing-House central portal. Interoperability with international nodes such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) is being further developed (see paragraph 19 below).

14. In addition, the Secretariat has developed guidelines for simple interoperability, which will enable the Biosafety Clearing-House to search registered national website nodes for information, as well as national databases. Work is under way to make other international, regional and national nodes interoperable with the Biosafety Clearing-House.

C. Common formats for information

15. A number of common formats for reporting information through the Biosafety Clearing-House have been developed, revised on the basis of feedback received from countries and the Bureau of the ICCP, and made available on the Biosafety Clearing-House. These formats include the following:

(a) 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;

(b) Common format for movement of living modified organisms under the advance informed agreement procedure;

(c) Common format for national biosafety laws, regulations and guidelines;

(d) Common format for bilateral, regional and multilateral agreements and arrangements; and

(e) Common format for risk assessment summaries.

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

16. At its meeting on 21 March 2001, the Bureau recommended that the Secretariat develop a tool-kit to illustrate and simulate the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House, to facilitate learning of the Biosafety Clearing-House information-sharing tools. The tool kit for the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House has been made available in paper and electronic formats, as well as online on the Biosafety Clearing-House central portal at http://bch.biodiv.org/Toolkit.

17. In line with the recommendations of the second meeting of the ICCP, the tool kit was further adapted with a search engine, and includes references to the intended audience for each module. Where appropriate, sections of the Biosafety Clearing-House have been linked to the corresponding module in the tool kit to facilitate ease of use.

18. The tool-kit also includes the interoperability standards and guidelines for the pilot-phase database. Database developers can follow these standards to establish national databases that are interoperable, or to make existing national databases interoperable, with the Biosafety Clearing-House database.

E. Cooperation with other international organizations

19. At its first meeting, ICCP requested the Executive Secretary to seek the appropriate administrative arrangements with relevant international organizations, such as OECD and UNIDO, and Governments, to facilitate implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House. Memoranda of understanding were signed with UNIDO on 7 September 2001 and with OECD on 23 January 2002.

20. As requested by the ICGEB on 27 April 2001, the Secretariat is continuing cooperation with the ICGEB on a voluntary basis, while co-ordinating harmonization of data and exchange of interoperability standards for information-sharing.

21. In addition to providing access to the pilot phase interoperability guidelines during the regional meetings on the Biosafety Clearing-House, the Secretariat provided a review of the development of standards to make distributed databases interoperable during the meeting of the informal advisory committee (IAC) of the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention, held in Montreal on 11 November 2001, and requested IAC members to make this information better known to their focal points and other relevant organizations and initiatives.

22. Interoperability guidelines were also discussed at the informal meeting on formats, protocols and standards for improved exchange of biodiversity-related information, held in Montreal on 19-20 February 2002, where copies were distributed to participants from international initiatives and organizations (including the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), Global Invasive Species

Program (GISP), Global Taxonomy Initiative (GTI), Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN), Ramsar Bureau, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS), and North American Biodiversity Information Network (NABIN)) .

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

23. In accordance with the request in paragraph 7 of ICCP recommendation 2/8, the Secretariat has initiated the development of CD-ROMs of the pilot phase that can be used for training purposes, and that will provide templates and guidance to facilitate the creation of national biosafety clearing-houses that are inter-operable with the Biosafety Clearing-House. Prototypes of these CD-ROMs will shortly be made available for consideration.

G. Access to the roster of experts

24. In accordance with the request in paragraph 8 of ICCP recommendation 2/8, the biosafety roster of experts has been made accessible through the Biosafety Clearing-House, at http://bch.biodiv.org/Pilot/ExpertStart.asp.

H. Identifying and addressing the capacity needs of countries

25. A series of regional workshops on the Biosafety Clearing-House has been held in order to provide countries with the opportunity to articulate their needs and expectations with regard to the establishment of the pilot phase.

26. To this end, a regional meeting for the Central and Eastern European region was held in Nitra, Slovakia, back-to-back with the UNEP-GEF Regional Workshop on Biosafety, from 5 to 9 February 2002 (UNEP/CBD/BCH/CEE.Reg/1/2), and a regional meeting for the Asia and Pacific region is scheduled to be held in Beijing, back-to-back with the UNEP-GEF Asia Pacific Regional Workshop on Biosafety, from 4 to 8 March 2002. Previously, a regional meeting for the African countries was held in Nairobi, from 26 to 28 February 2001 (UNEP/CBD/BCH/Afr.Reg/1/2), and for Latin America and the Caribbean in Lima, from 4 to 6 September 2001 (UNEP/CBD/BCH/LAC.Reg/1/2).

27. In addition, a second, one-day training session was convened for Africa in Nairobi, on 19 January 2002, back-to-back with the UNEP-GEF African Regional Workshop on Biosafety, to provide "hands-on" training on the use of the Biosafety Clearing-House (which had not been launched at the time of the first regional meeting).

28. Financial support for these meetings was provided by the Governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Japan.

29. In accordance with the request from the ICCP at its first meeting, the Secretariat is, on a continuing basis, analysing the identified capacity-building and financial requirements of the developing countries, in particular the least developed and small island developing States among them, and countries with economies in transition, as well as countries that are centres of origin and centres of genetic diversity, to enable their active participation in the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House. Following the completion of this round of regional meetings, an addendum to this note (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/3/5/Add.3) will be issued containing a synthesis of capacity-building needs identified by the regions, with a view to assisting the Intergovernmental Committee consider the possibility of establishing a capacity-building programme addressing those needs.

I. Languages

30. The pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House is being primarily developed in English, in accordance with the recommendation from the first meeting of the ICCP that the language to be used in the development of the central database would be the language employed currently in the databases to be accessed. However, the pilot phase has been designed to accommodate all six United Nations languages at a later stage. In addition, the use of multilingual thesauri in determining search terms will offer the Biosafety Clearing-House the option of adding search terms in the required languages when this functionality is implemented.

31. After considering some of the issues raised during the regional meetings, the Bureau of the ICCP recommended, at its meeting of 18-19 February 2002, that translation of the central portal of the Biosafety Clearing-House be initiated, in order to assist countries to fully participate in the development of the pilot phase.

J. Monitoring and review

32. 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.

33. Following the request in paragraph 11 of ICCP recommendation 2/8 that the review should be carried out prior to the sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, the Executive Secretary has commissioned a suitable consultant to undertake the independent review of the pilot phase. The outcome of the review will be circulated later as an addendum to this note (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/3/5/Add.1) for consideration by the third meeting of the ICCP.

34. The Bureau, in line with the mandate given to it by ICCP to provide management oversight on the development and implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House, will prepare a note for consideration by ICCP at its third meeting, highlighting recommendations for further development of the Biosafety Clearing-House on the basis of the strengths and weaknesses that will have been identified in the report of the consultant in conducting the independent review. In preparing these recommendations, the Bureau will seek technical advice from the liaison group of technical experts that has been involved in the formulation of technical recommendations for the development and implementation of the pilot phase so far. The Bureau recommendations will be circulated as an addendum to the present note (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/3/5/Add.2).

L. Unique identification

35. At its second meeting, in paragraph 10 (a) recommendation 2/8, ICCP invited any international organization, as appropriate, to make available to the Executive Secretary, as soon as possible, harmonized unique identification systems in relation to databases on living modified organisms.

36. In response to this invitation, the OECD has communicated the development of its *Series on Harmonization of Regulatory Oversight in Biotechnology, No. 23: OECD Guidance for the Designation of a Unique Identifier for Transgenic Plants.* This report is available online at: http://www.olis.oecd.org/olis/2002doc.nsf/LinkTo/env-jm-mono(2002)7. The Secretariat has contacted the OECD Secretariat with a view to making the report available as an information document at the third meeting of the ICCP.

III. CONCLUSIONS

37. Guided by the principles of inclusiveness, transparency and equity, and following the guidelines and recommendations of ICCP at its first and second meetings, and the advice from the ICCP Bureau, the Secretariat has endeavoured to implement the pilot phase of Biosafety Clearing-House to meet the objectives of the pilot phase.

38. The implementation of the pilot phase is continuing, building on the experience gained during its development and particularly in response to recommendations that have been made during the regional meetings on the Biosafety Clearing-House, with a view to making the pilot phase more comprehensive, user-friendly, understandable and searchable. 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 (http://bch.biodiv.org) and send comments to BCH@biodiv.org.

39. Further development of the pilot phase will depend on the outcomes of the independent 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 identified capacity needs;

(b) Mechanisms to encourage country participation in the development of the pilot phase, and to provide feedback on the ways countries use the Biosafety Clearing-House (central portal, regional nodes, national databases, non-Web-based information-sharing systems, etc);

(c) Further elucidation of the roles and responsibilities of the national focal point for the Biosafety Clearing-House; and

(d) Managing the transition from the pilot phase to the development of a fully functional and accessible Internet-based Biosafety Clearing-House when the Protocol enters into force.
