UNEP

CBD

CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Distr.
GENERAL

UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/1/INF/17
9 January 2004

ENGLISH ONLY

CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION
ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY SERVING AS THE
MEETING OF THE PARTIES TO THE CARTAGENA
PROTOCOL ON BIOSAFETY
First meeting
Kuala Lumpur, 23-27 February 2004

TECHNICAL MEETING: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING HOUSE (BCH) IN INDUSTRIALISED COUNTRIES. EXPERIENCES AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Note by the Executive Secretary

1. At the request of the Government of Switzerland, the Executive Secretary is circulating herewith, for the information of participants in the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the summary outcomes of the Technical Meeting on the Implementation of the Biosafety Clearing-House in Industrialised Countries—Experiences and Future Development, held in Geneva on 29-30 September 2003.

2. The document is being issued in the form and language in which it was received by the Secretariat of the Convention.

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Technical Meeting: Implementation of the Biosafety Clearing House (BCH) in industrialised countries. Experiences and future development (Geneva, 29-30 September 2003)

SUMMARY OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

1. The technical meeting on implementation of the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) in industrialized countries was organized by the Swiss Agency for Environment, Forests and Landscape with the support of the Geneva Environment Network. The meeting was held on 29 and 30 September 2003 in Geneva. Thirty-four participants from government agencies and relevant inter-governmental organizations attended the meeting (see List of Participants at Annex II).

2. The meeting was convened to share experiences in the development of the pilot phase of the BCH and to consider options for its future development. Following introductory presentations on the BCH by the CBD Secretariat, and the BioTrack Product Database by the OECD Secretariat, as well as presentations from several countries describing the current status of their BCH websites, the meeting discussed three main items, namely: (i) national and regional experiences in developing national "Biosafety Information Nodes" that could serve as components of the BCH and/or BioTrack; (ii) technical and practical issues; and (iii) capacity-building. The agenda of the meeting is attached at Annex I to the present report.

Item I. National and regional experiences in developing national "Biosafety Information Nodes" that could serve as component of the BCH and/or Biotrack

3. Under this item of the agenda, participants discussed national and regional experiences in developing national "Biosafety Information Nodes" that could serve as component of the BCH and/or Biotrack. Presentations were given by representatives from Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United States.

Item II. Technical and practical issues

4. Under this item, participants discussed various technical and practical issues linked to the structure of the Central Portal, to data management and interoperability, as well as issues relating to the database on decisions according to Article 11.1. A summary of the comments made by the participants, and main conclusions reached during the discussions, is included in the "Conclusions and Comments" section of this report. It is hoped that Parties and Governments might find these useful during the implementation of the national components of the BCH and/or Biotrack.

Item III. Capacity-building

5. Under this item, a presentation was given by UNEP/GEF on the ongoing work related to BCH capacity building under the UNEP/GEF projects on development and

implementation of national biosafety frameworks. The participants discussed some national initiatives in BCH capacity building as well as technical and institutional arrangements at national and international level to support operation of the BCH (e.g. the role of national co-ordinator and MOP-1).

CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENTS

A. Languages

6. There is a need for national BCH components to serve national needs, including provision of information in a national language (as well as the need to provide information in English or another UN language for use by the Central Portal).

7. Full translation of the controlled vocabularies is required.

8. Further discussion is needed regarding what information is "generic" and should be translated on a priority basis, and what information is "specific" and may not need translation (lower priority).

B. Controlled vocabularies

9. Controlled vocabularies are currently sourced from the Cartagena Protocol text, international thesauri such as AGROVOC and ENVOC, other databases such as OECD's Biotrack, where available. There is a need to expand the use of controlled vocabularies to more BCH information items whenever practical, and also to promote the expansion of existing international thesauri into relevant fields.

10. The importance of using controlled vocabularies in many instances was noted, as only the controlled vocabularies are translated and available for searching purposes.

11. Governments can determine their own controlled vocabularies, but these should be "mapped" to those used on the Central Portal.

12. Some controlled vocabularies are nested (i.e. using broader or narrower terms) to assist in finding relevant records.

13. The Secretariat should create reference to the controlled vocabulary by type in the schema (to allow validation) and make the controlled vocabulary available through the web service.

14. Checking the log files for frequently used search terms in the free text fields that are missing from the current list may expand the controlled vocabulary.

15. A formal procedure should be defined for the maintenance (updates and reviews) of controlled vocabularies (MOP-1).

16. Expert analysis would be needed to validate the search terms in different languages, including synonyms, etc.

C. Common Formats

17. The current common formats are decision-based (along the lines of the Protocol), rather than LMO/product-based (which is the case in many countries). Therefore, it would be useful to provide product/LMO-based searching function (such as with the OECD's unique ID database).

18. The current common formats are "modular", to support repeatability of information sub-sets (e.g "contact details").

19. Support for repeatable fields is required in the common formats (such as number of CNAs involved, etc.).

20. Some interpretation is needed of terms used in the Protocol and reflected in the common formats (e.g. "identity of the LMO" as required for reporting information under Article 11.1), as this may impact on search results.

21. A formal procedure should be defined for the maintenance (updates and reviews) of common formats to be considered at MOP-1.

D. Central Portal and organization of information

22. Information should be categorized with consideration of the needs of the user (e.g. distinction between "decisions" and "notifications").

23. The main target of the system is currently to meet the needs of the regulators, but this role may be expanded following future MOP decisions.

24. National BCH components are often more suited to meet the needs of public information requests. This is an important role at the national level.

25. Simple and advanced search pages are provided to assist those users with more specific information needs.

26. Links to additional information should be provided where this is not provided by the BCH.

E. Relationship between Central Portal and national components

27. The Secretariat has released a notification outlining several options for national components, namely:

(a) Register data through the Central Portal (with the option of storing further information the central database);

(b) Register and store information locally using database templates, and send data to the Central Portal;

(c) Make data available through a local website and allow the Central Portal to crawl the site to retrieve data; and

(d) Store data on national databases and actively make those data available through the Central Portal using BCH interoperability protocols.

28. These options are not mutually exclusive and countries may "mix and match" for different types of information according to their needs and available technical expertise.

29. There is no one preferred option for meeting national obligations. Many participants at the meeting indicated that their governments are likely to follow options (c) or (d), but some others plan to use options (a) or (b), at least for the next few years.

30. Some countries suggested that they intended to provide information via a simple link to a national website, although there was discussion regarding whether this would meet the need to make information "available" through the BCH as it would not allow users to search or translate any of the information.

31. The CBD Secretariat demonstrated a prototype database application to allow countries to enter and store data locally, and send it to the Central Portal of the BCH using either the Internet or exported to a CD-ROM.

32. Additionally, it could be worthwhile to investigate the possibility of creating standard (interoperable) web-pages for use by countries with their national databases if desired, although it was noted that database applications and technical solutions should be as independent as possible from proprietary software to facilitate porting to different platforms.

33. It was noted that the ICCP recommended that much of the data in the BCH should be decentralized. Therefore, the Central Portal is intended to keep a central register of metadata through the common formats, with detailed information maintained at a local level.

F. Monitoring of changes

34. A notification system is recommended to inform national components of any impending changes to the Central Portal. Subscription information can be sent by email / fax / etc.

35. Additionally, regulators would appreciate an alert system for updates in the data held in the BCH – particularly associated with Article 11.1.

36. Users should be able to self-register with such notification/alert systems, and set the frequency with which they receive information. (The CBD Secretariat noted that this is currently in development, but not a top priority.)

37. Availability of a document outlining the BCH business/database rules would be useful (e.g. regarding changes to applicant names).

G. Data management for reporting under Article 11.1

38. Many countries intend to report decisions taken prior to entry into force of the Protocol.

39. It was noted that countries take different approaches to providing information, with some providing the example that a single record on the BCH could include multiple approvals (a product-based approach) as opposed to a single record for each approved use (a decision-based approach).

40. There was consensus that unique identifiers are an important element in the operation of the BCH, and that they should be included in the record when available.

41. Once a unique identifier has been established for an LMO, it should be consistently used for each subsequent application in any other country.

42. There is a need to reduce the need to re-enter information when reporting to the BCH (e.g. for LMO types and contact information). Provision of a standard "identification data set" for an LMO could provide consistency across country records in the BCH, and ensure that all records relating to a specific LMO could be easily identified.

43. The OECD unique identifier system currently only applies to agricultural plants, but not to micro-organisms or higher life forms and this needs to be addressed.

H. Institutional Arrangements

44. It is logical to establish some type of technical working group at an international level, but policy should be split from technical issues where possible.

45. At a national level, a focal point must be nominated to undertake national responsibilities. The Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol may need to clarify the role of the BCH-NFP, separating the role of "publishing" information on the BCH from "validating" it.

46. Prior to the first Meeting of the Parties, informal meetings (such as this one) can address issues at an interim level.

47. Budget implications for the establishment of new bodies to oversee development of the BCH will need to be taken into account.

I. Priorities for transition from pilot phase

48. Participants were reminded that, even in the pilot phase, the current system is the "real BCH".

49. Governments need to put their data into the BCH.

50. Stability of the system is needed prior to the first Meeting of the Parties for those countries not yet fully familiar with the operation of the BCH to continue with their training.

51. It will be necessary to ensure that information coming from different sources is not duplicative.

52. An orderly transition is needed for those countries that are transferring the source of their information from OECD's Biotrack to national databases (will be considered at the meeting on 24-26 November).

53. The CBD Secretariat could send out another reminder to Governments to fill in data and to share any difficulties they may be facing.

54. Harmonisation between national sites can be promoted at a conceptual level, while maintaining national freedom at a technical level.

Annex I

Agenda

Monday 28.09.2003

10.00 Welcoming remarks, introductions of participants and objectives and organisation of the meeting

BCH and Biotrack : where are we today ? (60')

10.15 Presentation of the BCH, including the central portal, national participation, interoperability, and other issues (CBD Secretariat)

10.45 The Biotrack Product database, a contribution of the OECD to the BCH - Consequences for Member countries and/or Parties (OECD Secretariat)

National and regional experiences in developing national "Biosafety Information Nodes" that could serve as component of the BCH and/or Biotrack (90')

11.15 Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany

14:00 Slovenia, Switzerland, USA, UNEP-GEF

Technical and practical issues

14:30 Issues linked to the structure of the Central Portal such as (90')

- Organisation of the information
- Common Formats
- Controlled vocabulary
- Languages
- Quality insurance: Participation of NGO including the industry
- Others

16:30 Issues linked to the structure of the Central Portal (continued)

Tuesday 29.09.03

09:00 Summary of the discussion from day 1

09:30 Issues linked to data management and interoperability such as (90')

- Relation between Central BCH structure and national structure
- Monitoring of changes in the central BCH
- Management of data according to Art. 11.1
- Other

11.15 Database on decision according to Art. 11.1 (90')

- LMOs
- Unique identifier
- Type of use
- Data produced before the entering into force of the CP / or by Non Parties
- Others

Capacity building (60')

12:00 Ongoing work related to BCH capacity building under the UNEP/GEF projects on development respectively implementation of national biosafety framework

12:30 National initiatives in BCH capacity buidling

14.00 Technical and Institutional arrangements at national and international level to support operation of the BCH (e.g. the role of national co-ordinator and MOP-1) (45')

Conclusions and recommendations

15:00 Priorities for the transition to the fully operational BCH

- How to address emerging technical/other issues in a integrated and concerted way
- Preparation of MOP1
- Future of Biotrack with regard of the implementation of the BCH;
- Capacity building
- Others

17:00 End of the meeting

Annex II

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