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PROTOCOL ON BIOSAFETY

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Item 3 of the provisional agenda\*

### OPERATION AND ACTIVITIES OF THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE

*Note by the Executive Secretary*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) was established by Article 20 of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety as part of the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), 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, taking into account the special needs of developing country Parties, 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”. The Biosafety Clearing-House is accessible online at <http://bch.cbd.int/>.

2. The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (COP-MOP) adopted, in past meetings, two main guidance documents regarding the functioning and implementation of the BCH: the modalities of operation of the BCH; and the multi-year programme of work for the operation of the BCH.

3. At their third meeting, the Parties to the Protocol, in decision BS-III/2, emphasized “the important role of the Biosafety Clearing-House in implementing the Protocol”. In the same decision, the Parties to the Protocol also urged Parties to: (i) continue contributing information to the BCH; (ii) include information pertaining to decisions on LMOs and risk assessments taken prior to entry into force of the Protocol; (iii) share with the Secretariat identified constraints on making information available; and (iv) provide, where available, information relating to unique identification when registering decisions about LMOs.

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4. In the same decision, the Parties to the Protocol requested the Executive Secretary to:
  - Continue to collaborate with nodes that are interlinked and interoperable with the BCH;
  - Continue to support capacity-building activities in partnership with organizations such as UNEP-GEF;
  - Make decisions and other information on LMOs and risk assessments readily available;
  - Undertake the translation of the central portal into the six official languages of the United Nations;
  - Undertake an external security audit of the BCH and its infrastructure;
  - Continue to develop non-Internet based mechanisms for countries to access information in the BCH;
  - Undertake another survey of BCH users to compare improvements against existing baseline data and submit this information for consideration by the Parties at their fourth meeting as part of the review of the implementation of the Protocol envisaged in the medium-term programme of work.
5. In decision BS-III/14, the COP-MOP requested Parties “to submit their first regular national report, covering the period between the entry into force of the Protocol for each Party and the reporting date, 12 months prior to its fourth meeting, to allow consideration of the reports at that meeting”. In presenting their first national reports, Parties were requested to describe any obstacles or impediments encountered regarding provision of relevant information that exists but has not been provided to the BCH. Parties were also requested to provide information regarding their experiences and progress in implementing Article 20, including any obstacles or impediments encountered. A summary of the experiences by Parties drawn from the first national reports is reflected in this document and details of an analysis of the first national report are presented in a separate document (UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/4/13).
6. At its fourth meeting, the COP-MOP is invited to consider the general operation of the BCH in the light of the experience shared by Parties in their first national reports, the ongoing implementation of the programme of work of the BCH so as to further plan future BCH activities.
7. Section II of the present document contains a progress report on the multi-year programme of work for the BCH (decision BS-II/2); a summary of experiences drawn from the first national reports in section III; further activities for consideration during the upcoming inter-sessional period in section IV; and in section V, elements of a decision on the operation of the BCH. The annex to the document summarizes BCH reporting statistics.

## **II. PROGRESS REPORT ON THE MULTI-YEAR PROGRAMME OF WORK FOR THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE**

### ***A. Programme element 1: Structure and function of the Central Portal***

8. The objective of this programme element is to “improve ease of reporting and accessing information in the Biosafety Clearing-House in response to identified needs of users”.
9. Following several revisions and a major revamping during the inter-sessional period, the BCH has a new layout that is harmonized with the new CBD website (<http://www.cbd.int>), which was released in May 2007. Also added are new navigation tools similar to those of the CBD website, which have been optimized to allow for better identification of the primary sections of the site.<sup>1/</sup> All common content between the BCH and the CPB websites has been unified and consolidated so that the BCH and the CPB websites mirror each other in order to avoid duplication and facilitate browsing.
10. All of the primary search interfaces in the “Finding Information” section have been merged as much as possible in order to facilitate access to cross-referenced data and maximize the capacity of BCH

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<sup>1/</sup> The current version of the BCH includes six primary sections: The BCH, The Protocol, Finding Information, Registering Information, Resources, and Help.

users to retrieve information from the central portal. Optional advanced search functions have been integrated into each primary search interface in order to reduce search time without compromising ease of use. Grouping options have been enhanced in all search interfaces in order to allow for queries of all major geographical or political groupings of countries.

11. Country profiles, containing summary statistics and links to all information registered by individual countries, are now accessible from all the pages of the BCH.

12. Records of living modified organisms (LMOs) contain a new feature whereby users can access country decisions (categorized according to “Domestic Use”, “Import”, “Environmental Release” and “Other”) and risk-assessment reports that are directly related to specific LMOs.

13. An important step toward improving the ease of accessing information in the BCH in response to identified needs of users is the development of two new solutions: ‘Hermes’ and the ‘BCH Ajax Plug-In’. These were created to assist countries, developing their BCH national nodes, to be interlinked and interoperable with the central portal. <sup>2/</sup>

14. In accordance with decision BS-III/2, the Secretariat also undertook the following actions:

- The commencement of the translation of the BCH into the six United Nations official languages;
- An external security audit in March 2008 of the central portal and its infrastructure with the generous contribution of the Swiss Government in order to ensure full security of information and minimize any chances of information loss. <sup>3/</sup>

15. A survey of Biosafety Clearing-House users was launched in December 2007 to compare improvements against existing baseline data. The main results of the survey are presented in subsection F below as part of the review of the implementation of the Protocol as planned in the medium-term programme of work. Furthermore, a report of the survey of Biosafety Clearing-House users is available as an information document (UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/4/INF/20).

### ***B. Programme element 2: Information content and management***

16. The objective of this programme element is to “increase the amount of information that is currently being reported to the Biosafety Clearing-House, and ensure it is provided in a timely manner”.

17. The annex compares the amount of data available in the BCH between November 2005 and December 2007.

18. A general increase in the amount of information reported to the BCH is apparent for all the main categories of data: National Contacts (+11%), Laws and Regulations (+49%), Country's Decisions and other Communications (+25%), and risk assessment reports (+385%). Nevertheless, only six decisions under the Advance Informed Agreement Procedure (AIA) have been reported and only 10 countries have submitted risk assessment reports. Furthermore, the analysis of the first national reports of the Parties on the implementation of the Cartagena Protocol (UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/4/13) reveals that, at the global level, only 28% of the information required under the Protocol has been provided to the BCH.

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<sup>2/</sup> Hermes is an application developed by the Secretariat which provides the building blocks of a national BCH website that are hosted on the Secretariat's servers. The BCH Ajax plug-In is a client side application based on Ajax technology that can be easily integrated within any website to allow for the dynamic display of information from the BCH. The benefits of using the BCH Ajax Plug-In include (i) it does not require any specific IT knowledge, (ii) it works on all server platforms, (iii) it does not require any software installation and (iv) all required files are located on the BCH Central Portal and maintained by the Secretariat. As of February 2008, about 60 countries had communicated their appreciation and initiated work on either Hermes or the Ajax application for their national BCH nodes See also notification SCBD/BS/PL/61720 dated 17/01/2008 to the BCH National Focal Points on “Availability of new IT features for the development of Biosafety Clearing-House national nodes (Hermes and the BCH Ajax plug-In)”.

<sup>3/</sup> The report of the external security audit of the Central Portal of the Biosafety Clearing-House and its infrastructure will be made available in document UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/4/INF/19 (available at <http://www.cbd.int/mop4/doc/?tab=1> )

Also, 64% of the information either does not exist or is inapplicable (although only 8% of the respondents indicated that the information exists but has not yet been provided). <sup>4/</sup>

19. The activity of the Secretariat under this programme element mainly focused on the compilation of special types of information in: (i) registries relating to LMOs, parental organisms and genes; (ii) international organisations involved in biosafety activities; and (iii) general biosafety documentation registered in the BCH Biosafety Information Resource Centre (BIRC). In particular, a unique revised LMO registry, including all current OECD Unique Identifiers, has been consolidated in order to optimize the management of information available in the BCH.

20. In following the recommendations of the BCH Informal Advisory Committee (BCH-IAC), the Secretariat is also undertaking a revision of the common formats available for registering information in order to highlight those data-entry fields that are critical to the relevance and usefulness of information registered in the BCH. Accordingly, an analysis of the quality and completeness of the information made available through the Central Portal is in progress and the Secretariat will liaise with Parties in order to ensure that the information registered in the BCH is “accurate, complete and in conformity with the appropriate common formats.

21. Pending the availability of text translations from interested countries, enhanced technical functionality for multiple languages support has been added to the BCH <sup>5/</sup> in order to display information in languages other than the six official United Nations languages.

**C. Programme element 3: Sharing information on and experience with living modified organisms**

22. The objective of programme element 3 is to “make a broader range of biosafety information accessible to users of the Biosafety Clearing House”.

23. Documentation previously available in the Biosafety Information Resource Centre (BIRC) has been divided into two databases in order to facilitate retrieval of information and allow for better classification. The first, the *Scientific Bibliographic Database on Biosafety*, is now exclusively dedicated to purely scientific articles published in international scientific journals and is maintained by the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB). <sup>6/</sup> The second database, still called the *Biosafety Information Resource Centre (BIRC)*, contains only “grey” literature <sup>7/</sup> and is maintained by the Secretariat. In the spirit of the inclusiveness and transparency requested by the Parties, the BIRC is open to all contributors who open ‘General User’ accounts on the BCH. The UNEP-GEF biosafety projects have largely contributed to the significant increase in the number of records registered in the BIRC (from about 250 up to over 700 entries).

**D. Programme element 4: Capacity-building and non-Internet accessibility**

24. The objective of programme element 4 is to “ensure that countries have the necessary capabilities to access the Internet-based central Portal and are able to access information through the Biosafety Clearing-House in a timely manner”.

25. In collaboration with, and with the support of, the UNEP-GEF project for Building Capacity for Effective Participation in the BCH (hereafter referred to as the UNEP-GEF BCH project) intersessional

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<sup>4/</sup> The results presented in the analysis should be interpreted within the limitations mentioned in section II.B of the cited document.

<sup>5/</sup> Available in Hermes, the BCH Ajax Plug-In and the BCH Central Portal

<sup>6/</sup> The ICGEB Biosafety Bibliographic Database is available on the ICGEB server at <http://www.icgeb.org/~bsafesrv/bsfdata1.htm> and also accessible through the BCH at <http://bch.cbd.int/database/bibliographic-references/>.

<sup>7/</sup> “Non-conventional literature” or “grey literature” comprises scientific and technical reports, case studies, journals and newsletters, teaching materials, manuals, toolkits, presentations, conference papers, internal reports, government documents, newsletters, etc. which are not readily available through commercial channels.

training activities for BCH national focal points were undertaken during 11 regional workshops. <sup>8/</sup> Furthermore, in accordance with a request from the Parties, <sup>9/</sup> and the support of, and in collaboration with the UNEP-GEF BCH project, additional BCH training will be organized by the Secretariat and offered to a number of BCH national focal points at the margins of the fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol .

26. Also in collaboration with the UNEP-GEF BCH project, and following the major revamping of the BCH, an entirely new “Help” section has been planned and partially developed. This is being done in order to integrate into the BCH all of the training modules and capacity-building experiences developed and accumulated under the auspices of the UNEP-GEF projects.

27. A training site open to all BCH users, <sup>10/</sup> as well as dedicated training databases for use during national capacity-building workshops, are available as part of the ongoing effort to improve the ease with which BCH users can register and browse national information.

28. UNEP-GEF BCH project’s regional advisors have played and continue to play an important role in this effort. In their capacity of resource persons and trainers since the inception of the UNEP-GEF BCH project in 2003, they have participated in 130 national or regional workshops and have undertaken about 240 national missions.

29. In accordance with a request from the Parties to continue developing ‘non-Internet based mechanisms for countries to access information in the Biosafety Clearing-House’, <sup>11/</sup> off-line digital versions of the BCH have been shipped on a quarterly basis to Parties and other Governments as required. <sup>12/</sup>

#### ***E. Programme element 5: Review of activities***

30. The objective of programme element 5 is to “ensure that the programme of work is achieving the goals of the Biosafety Clearing-House effectively”.

31. The primary mechanisms through which the Secretariat receives feedback on the operation of the Biosafety Clearing-House are: (i) comments from primary stakeholders; (ii) recommendations from the Informal Advisory Committee (BCH-IAC); and (iii) targeted surveys.

32. During the last intersessional period, all national focal points for the Biosafety Clearing-House were invited to assess the ongoing changes of the BCH as well as make recommendations for possible improvement. In particular, the Secretariat issued a notification inviting “those Governments that have identified constraints on making information available in a timely manner and/or implemented strategies to overcome these difficulties to share their experiences with the Secretariat”. <sup>13/</sup> The Secretariat received feedback from the European Union and Norway (contained in document UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/4/INF/21) as well as other informal comments from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, New Zealand, and the Global Industry Coalition.

33. The BCH-IAC meets once a year to provide guidance and help resolve some technical issues associated with the ongoing development of the Biosafety Clearing-House. Summaries of outcomes of the

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<sup>8/</sup> UNEP-GEF BCH regional and subregional training workshops were held in Samoa for the Pacific region (in November 2004 and November 2005); Uruguay (May 2006) and Panama (September 2007) for the Latin America sub-region; Slovenia for CEE and EU countries (September 2007); Barbados for the Caribbean (December 2005 and November 2007); and 7 parallel workshops in Egypt for Africa, Asia and all remaining countries (March, 2008).

<sup>9/</sup> See decision BS-II/2, Annex, Programme Element 4

<sup>10/</sup> The BCH Training Site is available at <https://bchtraining.cbd.int/>.

<sup>11/</sup> See decision BS-III/2., paragraph 15

<sup>12/</sup> In December 2007, approximately 100 CDs were shipped to 36 different countries. As of March 2008, due to the increasing size of BCH file content, CD-ROMs were replaced by DVD-ROMs.

<sup>13/</sup> Notification 2006-053 was issued in accordance with decision BS-III/2 on the operation and activities of the Biosafety Clearing-House and it is available at <http://www.cbd.int/doc/notifications/2006/ntf-2006-053-bch-en.pdf>

IAC meetings are available through the BCH <sup>14/</sup> and its primary recommendations have been implemented with the exception of those that are addressed to the Parties to the Protocol on Biosafety and are reported in section IV of this document.

34. According to programme element 5 and to decision BS-III/2 a second survey of Biosafety Clearing-House users was conducted in order to compare improvements against existing baseline data. Results of this survey are analysed below.

#### *F. Results of the survey of Biosafety Clearing-House users*

35. The survey, launched on 1 December 2007, was made available on the home page of the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) in four languages <sup>15/</sup> and in both electronic and printable format. A Notification was sent by the Executive Secretary inviting all National Focal Points for both the Cartagena Protocol and the BCH to participate in the survey. An analogous message was also sent by email to over 1,400 registered BCH account-holders who are not NFPs. By 31 January 2008, 82 responses to the questionnaire had been received. A detailed breakdown of the results, as well as a comparison of the improvements against the previous existing baseline data (where available), are contained in document UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/4/INF/20. <sup>16/</sup> Summarized below are the main trends noted from the survey results.

##### *Profile of the respondents*

36. A substantial number of the respondents (41%) identified themselves as BCH users who “manage and create records through the BCH Management Centre”. Furthermore, another 16% reported being an “IT expert involved in the development of national BCH”. Only 4% of respondents reported having used “non-Internet options (e.g. offline version of the BCH available on CD-ROM)”.

37. The primary reported purposes for using the BCH were to: (i) “access scientific, technical, environmental and legal information on, and experience with, LMOs” (85%); (ii) “find out which LMOs have been released in a particular area” (65%); and (iii) “assist [own] Government or institution to fulfill obligations under the Protocol” (63%). Information in the BCH that was reported to be of primary interest to the respondents included: “Laws and regulations” (79%), “Decisions and declarations” (74%), “Risk assessments” (72%), “LMO registry” (66%) or “National contact information” (63%).

38. When comparing these results with the baseline data from the previous survey (conducted in 2004), the main differences regarding the purposes for using the BCH are found in the categories “assist [own] Government or institution to fulfil obligations under the Protocol” and “find out which LMOs have been released in a particular area”. There were significant increases in both categories. Similarly, the main significant difference regarding the information in the BCH of primary interest to respondents is found in the category “Laws and regulations”, which experienced a strong increase.

39. A majority of respondents reported they were able to “easily access information through the BCH” (78%). The main factors affecting users’ ability to access the BCH were identified as the “Quality of Internet access” (15%) and “Access to computer with internet connection (11%)”.

40. More than one third of the respondents reported having attended BCH training workshops (36%), most of which were organized by the UNEP-GEF BCH project (29%). A group of respondents (21%) reported that they “have provided training on the BCH to others”.

41. The primary Internet browser reported was “Internet Explorer” (74%), followed by “Firefox or Netscape (Mozilla)” (20%). The most common connection speed to the Internet was reported as “LAN (office, high speed)” (54%) and only 4% of respondents stated having a connection speed of “56 kbps or

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<sup>14/</sup> Details about the BCH Informal Advisory Committee (BCH-IAC) meetings are available at <https://bch.cbd.int/about/iac/>

<sup>15/</sup> English, French, Spanish and Russian (courtesy translation)

<sup>16/</sup> Available at <http://www.cbd.int/mop4/doc/?tab=1>

less”. When comparing these results with the baseline data from the previous survey, there is a significant reduction in the percentage of respondents having a connection speed of “56 kbps or less”.

42. With regard to their “occupation/profession”, the largest group of respondents identified themselves as “Government civil servant” (48%) followed by “BCH national focal point” (27%) and “Academic researcher” (18%). Half of the respondents stated having good experiences in Internet use and another 23% reported being experts in this area. The larger groups reported having used the BCH in the last month (72%) and accessing it “Once a week or more often” (34%) or “2 to 3 times a month” (34%).

#### *Finding information in the BCH*

43. The main question posed under this section was about how, in general, users are satisfied when accessing the BCH to find information. In all categories, most respondents answered *satisfied* (average: 49%), followed by *very satisfied* (average: 22%) and *neutral* (average: 18%). Only 4% responded negatively to this question (*unsatisfied*: 3% and *very unsatisfied*: 1%) and 6% decided not to answer.

44. Specifically, the highest levels of satisfaction were reported for the following categories: (i) “Overall design” (88% of positive answers when calculating the sum of *very satisfied* and *satisfied*); (ii) “Organization of information and navigation tools in the homepage” (83%); (iii) “Relevance of information” (83%); (iv) “Usefulness of the BCH Training Site” (82%); and (v) “Usefulness of the BCH Training Modules” (80%). Minor, although significant, dissatisfaction was reported for the following categories: (i) “Completeness of information in the records” (57% positive answers; 24% neutral; and 18% negative); (ii) “Overall quality of information in the records” (60% positive answers; 24% neutral; and 15% negative); and (iii) “Completeness and quality of information” (56% positive answers; 29% neutral; and 12% negative).

45. When comparing these results with the baseline data from the previous survey, improvements in user satisfaction can be observed in all of the questions asked in both surveys. In particular, there is a strong improvement in the categories “Organization of search results” and “Ease of finding information through the search interfaces”.

#### *Registering information in the BCH*

46. Of the 34 respondents who provided answers under this section of the survey, 65% identified themselves as a “BCH national focal point”, 15% as a “national authorized user”, 6% as a member of a “Capacity-building organization”, 6% as a “Biosafety expert” and 9% as a “General User”.

47. The first question posed under this section addressed how, in general, the user is satisfied when accessing the BCH to register information. In all categories the results were as follows: satisfied (average 44%), neutral (average 26%), very satisfied (average 15%) and unsatisfied (average 2%). The highest satisfaction levels were reported for the “Overall design” (94% positive answers and 6% neutral). Minor, although significant, dissatisfaction was indicated for the “Support and assistance provided by the Secretariat” (74% positive answers; 12% neutral; 6% negative and 9% not responding).

48. When comparing these results with the existing baseline data, slight variations can be observed in only a few categories: e.g. general satisfaction increases in “Overall design” while satisfaction decreases in “Support and assistance provided by the Secretariat”. It is worth noting that, since 2005, most of the technical support requested by national users is provided by BCH regional advisors managed under the UNEP-GEF BCH project.

49. Regarding experiences using the common formats and the controlled vocabularies when registering information in the BCH, 59% of respondents’ comments were positive, 26% were neutral and 4% were negative. The highest satisfaction was indicated with the “Helpfulness of instructions for completing the common formats” (68% positive comments vs. 3% negative) while the lowest levels of satisfaction concerned the “Completeness of controlled vocabulary” (50% positive comments vs. 6% negative).

50. One question asked survey participants to individually rate the common formats for registering information. The majority of users expressed general satisfaction: averagely satisfied 41%, very satisfied 20%, neutral 15%, unsatisfied 3% and 22% not responding. The highest satisfaction was reported for the common format used for registering “National Focal Point” and “Competent National Authority” (in both cases 82% positive and no negative comments) while more dissatisfaction was reported for the common format used for registering “Risk assessment” and “Decision on LMO under Advance Informed Agreement” (in both cases 56% positive comments vs. respectively 18% and 9% negative).

#### *Interoperability*

51. The last section of the questionnaire was dedicated to information technology experts involved in the development of a national BCH and was answered by 13 respondents. This group indicated that their “Preferred way of submitting information to the BCH” is “Option 1: Using the BCH Management Centre” (54%), followed by “Option 3: Requesting the BCH to regularly download XML records from [own] national site: (i.e. crawling)” (31%), and “Option 4: Directly sending XML records to the BCH using the BCH Web Service” (15%). Among those using the Web Service (option 4), 31% reported “Java (Apache Axis)” as the SOAP implementation used and 23% reported “Microsoft .NET”. <sup>17/</sup>

52. None of the respondents indicated a preference for “Option 2: Using offline methods (e.g. e-mail, fax, etc.)”. However in question 2, three respondents stated that they used non-Internet options (e.g. offline version of the BCH available on CD-ROM). Two of them stated they were satisfied with both the “Usefulness of the non-Internet options” and the “Support and assistance provided by the Secretariat on non-Internet options” while the third opted for the “Not applicable/ Do not know” response.

53. The preferred ways of making available BCH information at the national level were as follows: (i) “Through a national BCH based on Hermes” (38%); (ii) “Through a national website which displays information from a local source” (31%); (iii) “Through a national website which collects information through the BCH Web Service” (23%); and (iv) “Through a national website which utilizes the BCH Ajax Plug-In.” (8%).

54. In the last question, experts indicated their level of satisfaction with the following aspects of the registration process.

- The “Range of choice of the interoperability mechanisms” received 85% positive comments (15% neutral and 0 negative).
- The “Range of solutions provided by the Secretariat which enable countries to disseminate their information at the national level (Hermes & BCH Ajax plug-In)” received 85% positive comments (8% neutral and 8% negative).
- The “Ease of registering new information” received 92% positive comments (8% neutral and 0 negative).
- The “Support and assistance provided by the Secretariat” received 92% positive comments (8% neutral and 0 negative).

55. The above data correspond to existing baseline data and show only minor variations in the “Range of choice of the interoperability mechanisms” category (small decrease) and in the “Support and assistance provided by the Secretariat” category (slight increase).

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<sup>17/</sup> In Q17, only 2 respondents indicated the Web Service (option 4) as the preferred way of submitting information to the BCH. However, 9 respondents answered Q18, which was specifically addressed to this subgroup.

### **III. SUMMARY OF EXPERIENCES DRAWN FROM THE FIRST NATIONAL REPORTS**

56. At their third meeting, the Parties to the Protocol adopted a format for the first regular national report on the implementation of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in decision BS-III/14, and the Parties agreed to consider the first national reports at their fourth meeting. An analysis of information contained in the first national reports received by the Secretariat is available in the note by the Executive Secretary on monitoring and reporting under the Protocol (UNEP/CBD/BS/COP-MOP/4/13).

57. One section of the first national report addresses possible obstacles or impediments that Parties may have encountered in making information available through the BCH. At the global level, less than one-third of the information required under the Protocol was reported to exist and to have been provided to the BCH. Several developing countries reported that they were still developing their national biosafety frameworks and that, upon their completion, all information required under the Protocol will be provided to the BCH. A majority of the developed countries reported having already submitted comprehensive information.

58. An analysis of the different categories of information highlighted the main gaps and challenges experienced by reporting countries. In some cases, the lack of information appears to be simply due to the absence of this data in the early stages of national implementation of the Protocol. Other categories of information with low rates of submission indicate a lack of decisions central to the Protocol. Finally, the category of information with the highest submission rate concerns Protocol administrative requirements (e.g. contact details for competent national authorities, national focal points, emergency contacts, etc.)

59. The main impediments reported regarding the implementation of Articles 20 include poor Internet connectivity; slow response from stakeholders; insufficient financial and human resources; lack of coordination among different departments; and insufficient public participation.

### **IV. FURTHER ACTIVITIES FOR CONSIDERATION DURING THE INTERSESSIONAL PERIOD**

60. This section presents some issues that need attention during the period between the fourth and fifth meetings of the Parties.

#### ***A. Completion of the Help section***

61. As reported in section II above, an entirely new "Help" section for the BCH has been planned in collaboration with the UNEP-GEF BCH project to help contribute to the sustainability of project outcomes, maximize experiences gained and draw on the lessons learned. This section will be tested and launched by September 2008 and translated into all United Nations languages. The primary features of the 'Help' section will include context-sensitive access to online help as well as access to the entire website documentation, with possibility to perform topics search, and navigate among related help topics. A "training resources" page will also allow users to access the complete set of training materials developed by the UNEP-GEF BCH project, for a more in-depth, hands-on training.

#### ***B. Planning and development of new ways to present information in a consolidated manner***

62. General feedback received from Parties regarding the information available in the BCH underscores the importance of BCH users generating pages of aggregated data that can assist them in making broader analyses of BCH content. Initial steps have been taken: for example, BCH tables now correlate the entries in the LMOs Registry with different types of decisions and risk assessment reports related to them.

63. Further steps in this direction may involve the introduction of online tools for the statistical analysis of BCH data as well as graphic representations of the geographical distribution of LMOs or centres of origins of parental species (e.g., by utilizing maps produced by GIS software).

**B. *Informal Advisory Committee of the Biosafety Clearing-House***

64. The next meeting of the Informal Advisory Committee of the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH-IAC) is scheduled for the end of 2008. In order to continue providing technical assistance to the Secretariat, it is expected that the Committee will be invited to consider the ongoing implementation of the programme of work as well as all relevant issues raised by the fourth meeting of the Parties.

**IV. ELEMENTS OF A DRAFT DECISION ON THE MODALITIES OF OPERATION OF THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE**

65. On the basis of the progress report on the implementation of the multi-year programme of work for the operation of the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH), the results of the 2007-2008 survey, the relevant information contained in the first national reports and the submissions on constraints identified for making information available to the Biosafety Clearing-House, the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (COP-MOP) may wish to adopt a decision on activities of the BCH that would confirm and build upon the multi-year programme of work that was adopted in decision BS-II/2.

66. The provision of relevant information to the BCH has increased considerably over the past two years. However, there continue to be gaps in some important areas and delays in providing required information. Therefore, the Parties to the Protocol may wish to again urge Parties and Governments to participate in the BCH by contributing relevant national information and all BCH user organisations to continue to make relevant biosafety information and resources available through the Biosafety Information Resource Centre (BIRC).

67. In particular, and in view of the limited data available in some categories of information in the BCH, the Parties to the Protocol may wish to urge Parties and other Governments to include complete information pertaining to decisions on the release or the first intentional transboundary movement of living modified organisms for intentional introduction into the environment, and risk assessments associated with such releases.

68. Recognizing the importance of facilitating ease of access of the BCH to all Parties, the Parties to the Protocol may wish to consider requesting the Secretariat to undertake additional activities, such as the introduction of online tools for statistical analysis and graphic representations of BCH data, and to allocate resources accordingly.

69. In consideration of the need to keep all information in the BCH updated, and also taking into consideration a proposal from both the European Union and the Government of Norway, the Parties to the Protocol may wish to consider implementing a procedure for the validation of information in the BCH Central Portal which establishes a timeframe for the confirmation or updating of information by Parties.

70. Recalling the need for capacity-building to enable developing countries to effectively use the BCH, and emphasizing their need to make the results of their decisions available to the public, the Parties to the Protocol may wish to request that the Executive Secretary continue assisting BCH national nodes that are interlinked and interoperable with the Central Portal through the maintenance and possible improvement of the two new IT solutions - "Hermes" and the BCH Ajax Plug-in - and allocate resources accordingly.

71. In consideration of (i) the upcoming closing of the UNEP-GEF BCH project, (ii) the ongoing development process of the BCH, (iii) the high rate of staff changes among BCH users at the national level, and (iv) the constantly increasing volume of records in the BCH, the Parties to the Protocol may wish to consider ways to ensure the sustainability of BCH capacity-building support to countries.

72. In particular and in taking into consideration a proposal of the Informal Advisory Committee for the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH-IAC), the Parties to the Protocol may wish to consider building on the experiences of the UNEP-GEF BCH project by (i) assuming financial responsibility for the periodic training of Biosafety Clearing-House users and their trainers as well as for the updating of outreach and

training materials; and (ii) requesting the Secretariat to establish processes for capacity-building activities under the Biosafety Clearing-House (e.g. training workshops).

73. As also suggested by the Informal Advisory Committee for the Biosafety Clearing-House, the Parties to the Protocol may wish to consider extending the Roster of Experts to include a “BCH experts” category and inviting Parties to nominate to the Roster of Experts those experts (e.g. regional advisors serving under the UNEP-GEF BCH project) who have met or exceeded their country’s expectations.

## Annex

## NUMBER OF RECORDS IN THE BIOSAFETY CLEARING-HOUSE

Category of information	Number of BCH records as of November 2005	Number of BCH records as of December 2007	Difference in records 2005-2007
Protocol focal points	171	187	9%
BCH focal points	199	191	-4%
Article 17 focal points	57	63	11%
Competent National Authorities	226	270	19%
National biosafety websites and databases	65	86	32%
<b>Total records for <i>National Contacts</i></b>	<b>718</b>	<b>797</b>	<b>11%</b>
National laws	236	441	87%
Bilateral, multilateral and regional agreements	42	50	19%
<b>Total records for <i>Laws &amp; Regulations</i></b>	<b>278</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>77%</b>
Decisions under AIA (introduction into the environment)	0	6	-
Decisions under Article 11.1 (LMO-FFPs)	404	490	21%
Other decisions and declarations	32	46	44%
<b>Total records for <i>Country's Decisions and other Communications</i></b>	<b>436</b>	<b>542</b>	<b>24%</b>
<b>Total records for <i>risk assessments reports</i></b>	<b>256</b>	<b>1,274</b>	<b>398%</b>
Roster of experts members	584	584	0
Reports on expert assignments	0	0	0
<b>Total records for <i>Roster of experts</i></b>	<b>584</b>	<b>584</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>TOTAL RECORDS SUBMITTED BY COUNTRIES</b>	<b>1,830</b>	<b>3,688</b>	<b>101%</b>
LMO registry	98	171	74%
Gene registry	-	57	-
Parental Organism registry	-	115	-
<b>Total records for <i>Registries</i></b>	<b>98</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>250%</b>
Capacity-building opportunities	61	82	34%
Capacity-building projects	77	134	74%
Capacity needs and priorities	54	52	-4%
Biosafety-related training and education programmes	44	33	-25%
<b>Total records for <i>Capacity-building activities</i></b>	<b>236</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Total records for <i>International Organizations</i></b>	<b>-</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Total records for <i>Scientific Bibliographic Database</i></b>	<b>5,282</b>	<b>7,757<sup>18</sup></b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>Total records for <i>Biosafety Information Resource Centre (BIRC)</i></b>	<b>-</b>	<b>(740)</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF RECORDS IN THE BCH</b>	<b>7,446</b>	<b>12,231</b>	<b>64%</b>

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<sup>18/</sup> Data refer to the total amount of records available either in the BIRC or in the Scientific Bibliographic database