



CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

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PRESS RELEASE

Biosafety meeting to help governments reduce GMO risks

Montpellier, France, December 2000 – With the debate over genetically-modified foods continuing to make headlines around the world, officials from the 177 member governments of the Convention on Biological Diversity are meeting in Montpellier from 11 – 15 December to discuss practical steps for minimizing some of the potential risks of biotechnology.

“The world’s governments adopted the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety earlier this year to establish a fair and transparent system for international trade in genetically modified organisms,” said Executive Director Klaus Toepfer of the United Nations Environment Programme, which administers the Secretariat for the 1992 Biodiversity Convention, under which the Protocol was negotiated.

“Many of the disagreements about living modified organisms that are being aired today are addressed in this groundbreaking agreement. The sooner governments make the Protocol operational, the sooner we can assure the public that human health and the natural environment are being fully protected,” he said.

Adopted in January 2000, the Biosafety Protocol aims to ensure the safe transfer, handling and use of genetically (or living) modified organisms that may have adverse effects on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, taking also into account risks to human health.

In Montpellier, the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety will seek progress on crafting the procedures and practical details that are required to make the Protocol effective.

Key issues include a system for information sharing, including the Biosafety Clearing-House; a review of international rules and standards pertaining to the handling, transport, packaging and identification of GMOs; options for establishing a compliance regime; and facilitating decision-making by Parties that may wish to import GMOs.

Establishing a framework for capacity building to help developing countries participate fully in the Protocol is also essential. An example of how this could be done is a \$39 million project funded by the Global Environment Facility that UNEP will implement over the next three-and-a-half years. This project will help 100 countries prepare their National Biosafety Frameworks and will facilitate the exchange of experience and best practices amongst developing countries and countries with economies in transition, including through a series of global and regional workshops.

Under the Protocol, Governments will decide whether or not to accept imports of genetically modified organisms on the basis of risk assessments. These assessments are to be undertaken in a scientific manner according to recognized risk assessment techniques. However, because the Protocol is based on the precautionary approach, importers can decide not to accept GMO imports if there is a lack of scientific certainty due to insufficient relevant scientific information and knowledge on whether or not the organism poses a risk to the environment or human health.

“When the biosafety regime was first adopted it was widely applauded by governments – both those that are keen to export genetically-modified foods and those that have expressed reservations about biotechnology – as a fair and balanced compromise solution,” said Hamdallah Zedan, Executive Secretary of the Convention.

“While the debate over all aspects of biotechnology will clearly continue for many years, the best way forward is to recognize this hard-fought agreement as a practical starting point,” he said.

The Protocol was adopted by 150 governments and has thus far been signed by 77 governments plus the European Community. It will remain open for signature at United Nations headquarters in New York until 4 June 2001. After 50 governments have ratified the Protocol it will enter into force and become legally binding (two countries, Bulgaria and Trinidad and Tobago, have already ratified). If governments move quickly, this could happen as early as 2002.

Note to journalists: The meeting will be held at the Palais de Congrès – Le CORUM in Montpellier. For interviews or more information, please contact Michael Williams at +41-22-917-8242, fax +41-22-797-3464, or e-mail mwilliams@unep.ch. Official documents and other information are posted at www.biodiv.org.

PRESS BACKGROUNDER

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety: Reducing the environmental risks of modern biotechnology

The biotechnology revolution

For thousands of years, people have used various techniques to modify plants and animals to improve food production. Traditional fermentation techniques, for example, are still used to transform grains into bread and beer and milk into cheese. Another traditional form of genetic manipulation is selective breeding, which makes it possible to promote preferred traits, such as certain colours in cut flowers or higher yields from milk cows. People even create hybrids of different species, as when crossing a horse and a donkey to create a mule.

Today, these low-tech methods of genetic modification are being supplemented and even replaced by the sophisticated tools of modern biotechnology. Researchers can now take a single gene from a plant or animal cell and insert it into another species to give that species a desired characteristic, such as resistance to a destructive pest or disease. The result is commonly referred to as a genetically modified organism (GMO), or as a living modified organism (LMO), resulting from modern biotechnology.

Proponents of this powerful new science argue that biotechnology has the potential, among others, to boost food security, reduce the need for clearing more land for farms, raise sustainable yields in marginal lands, and reduce the need for irrigation and agrochemicals. Others, however, are concerned over the possible risks that LMOs can pose for biological diversity – the ecosystems, species, and genetic resources whose interactions form the ‘web of life’ on Earth – and human health.

The need for biosafety

While advances in biotechnology have great potential for improving human well-being, it is widely recognized that LMOs must be subject to adequate safety measures. Such measures, known collectively as biosafety, seek to ensure the safe transfer, handling, use and disposal of LMOs.

With the biotech industry growing by leaps and bounds, the international community agreed on the need to develop a legally binding biosafety protocol under the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. Governments recognized that, while many countries with biotechnology industries already had national biosafety legislation in place, there was no binding international agreement addressing the movement of LMOs across national borders.

In 1995, the Convention’s member governments – who together constitute the Conference of the Parties (COP) – set up an open-ended ad hoc Working Group on Biosafety to draft a protocol. After several years of talks, the COP adopted the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in Montreal on 29 January 2000. The Protocol is named to honour the city of Cartagena, Colombia, which had hosted the COP’s first extraordinary meeting on biosafety in 1999.

How the Protocol works

The Biosafety Protocol promises to provide an international regulatory framework for the growing biotechnology industry that will reconcile the interests of international trade and the need for environmental protection. The Protocol will thus promote the environmentally sound application of biotechnology, making it possible to benefit from biotechnology’s potential while minimizing the risks to the environment and human health. It will also make it easier for governments, businesses, and civil society to collaborate with one another on strengthening biosafety.

The Protocol offers a number of tools for promoting biosafety:

- **Advanced Informed Agreement procedure (AIA)** – The Protocol sets out an advance informed agreement procedure that must be followed prior to the first shipment of an LMO intended for introduction into the environment (such as seeds or live fish). In these cases, the exporter must provide a detailed, written description of the organism to the importing country in advance of the shipment. The importer is to acknowledge receipt of this information within 90 days and then explicitly authorize the shipment within 270 days or state its reasons for rejecting the LMO. (The absence of a response, however, is not to be interpreted as implying consent.)

The purpose of the AIA procedure is to ensure that recipient countries have both the opportunity and the capacity to assess risks that may be associated with an LMO before agreeing to its import. It should be stressed that the procedure applies only to the *first* intentional transboundary movement of an LMO intended for introduction into the environment. It does *not* apply to LMOs in transit through a country, LMOs destined for contained use (in a scientific laboratory for example), or LMOs to be directly used as food or animal feed or for processing (such as corn or tomatoes).

- **Biosafety Clearing-House** – The Protocol establishes a Biosafety Clearing-House to facilitate the exchange of scientific, technical, environmental and legal information on living modified organisms. The Clearing-House will also include information on national laws and regulations applying to LMOs not covered by the AIA procedure – namely, agricultural commodities to be directly used as food, feed, or for processing, and LMOs in transit or contained use. This information will be vital for enabling governments to implement the Protocol.
- **Risk assessment and risk management framework** – Governments will decide whether or not to authorize the importation of LMOs after assessing the associated risks. These assessments are to be undertaken in a scientific manner based on recognized risk assessment techniques. However, in cases where the relevant scientific understanding is incomplete, a country may decide to apply the precautionary approach and refuse to permit imports.

In addition, the Protocol requires governments to establish and maintain mechanisms, measures and strategies for regulating, managing and controlling risks identified in the risk assessment procedures.

The Protocol also recognizes the right of importing countries, in reaching a decision on import, to take into account socio-economic considerations such as the value of biological diversity to their indigenous and local communities, provided it is consistent with their international obligations.

- **Capacity building** – The Protocol promotes international cooperation to help developing countries and countries with economies in transition build the needed human resources and institutional capacities. It also encourages governments to assist with scientific and technical training and to promote the transfer of technology, know-how, and financial resources. Because the Protocol is part of the Convention on Biological Diversity, biosafety activities will be eligible for support from the Convention's "financial mechanism". Governments are also expected to facilitate private-sector involvement in capacity building.
- **Public awareness** – While the Protocol concentrates on international action, it recognizes that national measures are essential to making its procedures effective. Member governments therefore commit themselves to promoting public awareness, ensuring public access to information, and consulting the public in decisions about biosafety. They must also take national measures to prevent illegal shipments and accidental releases of LMOs, and they must notify affected or potentially affected states in the event that an unintentional transboundary movement occurs.

What happens next?

Only after 50 governments have signed and then ratified the Protocol will the agreement enter into force and become legally binding on its members. When this happens, perhaps as early as 2002, a decision-making body called the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (MOP) will manage the Protocol's development and implementation.

Until then, governments will continue to discuss biosafety and the Protocol within an Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP). The ICCP has been mandated by the COP to prepare for the first Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, at which time the ICCP will cease to exist.

With biotechnology set to become more and more powerful as both a science and an industry, there can be little doubt that the Biosafety Protocol will remain high on the international environmental agenda for many years to come.

The Convention on Biological Diversity

The world's biological diversity is a vast and undervalued resource. Biodiversity encompasses every form of life, from the smallest microbe to the largest animal, plus the ecosystems that they form. It provides humanity with an abundance of goods and services, from food, energy and fibres to the genes that help us to control pests and diseases. It also underpins the natural processes that help control soil erosion, purify water and air and recycle carbon and nutrients.

The threat to biodiversity has never been so great as it is today. It has been understood for decades that human activities can affect the distribution and abundance of species, ecological systems and genetic variability and thus undermine the basis for life everywhere.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a large number of initiatives to stem the loss of species and the destruction of habitats and ecosystems. A consensus gradually emerged, however, that the Earth's priceless reservoir of biological diversity could be saved only through international cooperation and funding, based on the introduction of a suitable international legally binding instrument.

As a result, the Convention on Biological Diversity, negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), was adopted in 1992 and entered into force in 1993. Its aims are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of biological resources, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources.

For more information:

The Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity also serves as the Secretariat of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. Its mandate is to promote the ratification of the Protocol, make arrangements for meetings of the ICCP, and facilitate assistance to the Parties, particularly developing countries. Please contact us at:

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