The Biosafety Clearing-House of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

A Guide to the BCH

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Secretariat
of the
Convention
on Biological
Diversity
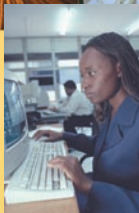
Biosafety Clearing-House

UNEP

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INTRODUCTION

The Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH) is an information exchange mechanism established by the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to assist Parties to implement its provisions and to facilitate sharing of information on, and experience with, living modified organisms (LMOs).

This guide is developed with the aim of familiarizing potential users with the Biosafety Clearing-House. It provides an overview of what information can be found in the BCH and how different stakeholders can use it to find and to provide relevant information. Detailed step-by-step guidance on use of the BCH is provided in the BCH toolkit, which is available from the Secretariat. This guide describes the BCH as it stands in its pilot phase.

Mandate of the BCH

Article 20, paragraph 1 of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety established the BCH as part of the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 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 IMPORTANCE OF THE BCH

The BCH is essential for the successful implementation of the Protocol. It assists Parties and other stakeholders in different ways in the implementation of the Protocol. For example, it provides a "one-stop shop" where users can readily access or contribute relevant biosafety-related information. This would assist Governments to make informed decisions regarding the importation or release of LMOs. Information in the BCH is owned and updated by the users themselves, thus ensuring its timeliness and accuracy.

By allowing easy and open access to key information, the BCH also fosters greater transparency in the implementation of the Protocol and this facilitates effective participation of the public and civil society in the decision-making process.

The BCH also facilitates scientific and technical cooperation between Parties and other relevant stakeholders, for example by allowing interested stakeholders to access or contribute information on existing biosafety capacity-building activities thus facilitating coordination and synergy between various initiatives.

For industry and other stakeholders the BCH allows easy access to information vital to their activities, including details of the national contacts, relevant laws and regulations governing LMO activities and the decisions and declarations made by Parties, especially with regard to transboundary movements.

HOW DOES THE
BCH WORK?

The pilot phase of the BCH consists of a **Central Portal** with linkages to a **distributed network** of national, regional and international nodes/databases. The Central Portal is the gateway to all sections of the BCH, including the search pages, the Management Centre where information is entered or updated, links to other relevant websites and the toolkit that helps users to understand how to use the BCH. It functions essentially as an interactive site map to assist in the navigation and use of the BCH.

The BCH functions like a "central information marketplace" where the providers and users of biosafety information interact and exchange that information in a transparent manner. To fulfill its role, the BCH has been designed to make **finding and providing information** as clear and intuitive as possible, for example by providing common formats and standardized terminology (controlled vocabulary). In addition, the BCH website is available in all six UN languages.

The Clearing-House concept

The term **clearing-house** originally referred to a financial establishment where cheques and bills are exchanged among members. Today, its meaning has been extended to include any agency that brings together seekers and providers of goods, services or information, thus matching demand with supply.

The BCH fulfills this role by facilitating exchange of biosafety information among Governments and other stakeholders. It provides a dynamic platform, where information is registered and where it can be easily searched and retrieved.

All interested users can freely search and retrieve information through the BCH website. On the other hand, information is submitted to the BCH databases through a secure facility known as the "Management Centre". Access to the Management Centre is restricted to BCH national focal points (BCH-NFPs) and other authorized users who are issued with login accounts and passwords. The registered information is validated (i.e. verified for accuracy and authenticity) by the BCH-NFPs before it is made publicly available. This helps to ensure the highest level of security and reliability of the information in the BCH.

CATEGORIES OF INFORMATION IN THE BCH

The BCH contains information that Parties have to provide, such as national contacts, national laws and decisions and declarations, as well as other information and resources relevant to the implementation of the Protocol, such as information on capacity-building, the roster of experts and links to other websites in particular other international biosafety-information exchange mechanisms. Governments that are not Parties to the Protocol are also encouraged to contribute appropriate information to the BCH (Article 24.2). All information available in the BCH is considered as non-confidential. The main categories of information in the pilot phase of the BCH are described below:

National contacts

(i) National focal points (NFPs): This section includes contact details of the NFPs of different Parties. Article 19 of the Protocol requires each Party to designate one NFP to be responsible, on its behalf, for liaising with the Secretariat.

(ii) National point of contact for receiving notifications regarding unintentional transboundary movements of LMOs: The BCH also includes for each Party details of a point of contact for receiving notifications pertaining to unintentional transboundary movements of LMOs and emergency measures as required by the Protocol (Article 17).

(iii) BCH national focal points (BCH-NFPs): This section contains names and addresses of BCH national focal points responsible for maintaining their country's information in the BCH, as recommended by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP).

(iv) Competent national authorities (CNAs): This section includes names and addresses of Competent National Authorities designated by each Party as required by the Protocol (Article 19). CNAs are responsible for performing the administrative functions required by the Protocol, including handling of notifications and communicating to the notifier and to the BCH decisions regarding importation or release of LMOs.

(v) National databases: This section includes links to national databases relevant to the implementation of the Biosafety Protocol.

Laws and regulations

National laws, regulations, and guidelines: This section includes existing laws, regulations and guidelines for implementation of the Protocol as required by the Protocol (Article 20.3(a)), including copies of those applicable to the import of LMOs intended for direct use as food or feed, or for processing, if available (Article 11.5), as well as information required by Parties for implementation of the advance informed agreement (AIA) procedure (Article 20.3(a)).

Bilateral, regional and multilateral agreements: Each Party is required to make available to the BCH any bilateral, regional, and multilateral agreements and arrangements for implementation of the Protocol (Article 20.3(b)), including those that they entered into before or after the date of entry into force of the Protocol (Article 14.2).

Decisions and declarations

Decisions on LMOs under Advance Informed Agreement (AIA) procedure: This section contains decisions resulting from the implementation of the AIA procedure under the Protocol (Article 10).

Decisions on LMOs for direct use as food or feed, or for processing (LMOs-FFP): This section includes information related to final decisions taken by Parties regarding domestic use, including placing on the market, of an LMO-FFP that may be subject to transboundary movement. A Party that makes such a decision must inform other Parties through the BCH within 15 days (Article 11.1). On the basis of such information, any Party may apply its domestic regulatory framework in taking a decision on the import of the LMO-FFP (Article 11.4). In the absence of such a framework, a developing country Party or a Party with

an economy in transition may use the procedures described in the Protocol for the purpose of decision making. Such action, however, must be declared through the BCH prior to the first import of the LMO-FFP (Article 11.6).

Other decisions & declarations: This section includes information pertaining to other decisions and declarations that Parties have to make available to the BCH, which are not covered by the two categories outlined above, including:

- Decisions by Parties regarding transit of specific LMOs through their territories (Article 6.1),
- Decisions by any Party to apply a simplified procedure, including cases where intentional transboundary movement of an LMO may take place at the same time as the movement is notified to the Party of import (Article 13.1 (a)) and/or advance specification of imports of LMOs to it to be exempted from the AIA procedure (Article 13.1 (b));
- Notices by any Party that its domestic regulations would apply with respect to specific imports to it (Article 14.4); and
- Notices of occurrences that lead, or may lead, to an unintentional transboundary movement of LMOs (Article 17.1).

Risk assessments

This section includes information on summaries of risk assessments or environmental reviews of LMOs generated by a regulatory process, and carried out in accordance with Article 15 of the Protocol, including, where appropriate, relevant information regarding products thereof (namely, processed materials that are of LMO origin, containing detectable novel combinations of replicable genetic material obtained through the use of modern biotechnology), and made available to the BCH in accordance with the requirements of the Protocol (Article 20.3(c)).

Unique identification

This database provides a registry of unique identification classifications as a key to access records in the BCH, such as the OECD's unique identifiers for transgenic plant lines for LMOs-FFP.

Capacity-building

Capacity-building opportunities: This database includes information on available or upcoming short-term capacity-building opportunities such as: technical assistance, scholarships and fellowships, personnel exchange/internships, scientific and technical cooperation, partnerships, discussion forums, professional networks, and others.

Capacity-building projects and initiatives: This database was established by the Secretariat to facilitate access to information on various capacity-building projects and other relevant initiatives. Such initiatives are generally long-term (i.e. 6 months or more) and include several activities implemented over a period of time.

Capacity-building needs and priorities: This section includes information on national and regional capacity-building needs and priorities for implementing the Protocol, as identified by national governments.

Roster of experts

The BCH provides access to the roster of experts established by the Conference of the Parties to provide advice and other support, as appropriate and upon request, to developing country Parties and Parties with economies in transition, to conduct risk assessment, make informed decisions, develop national human resources and promote institutional strengthening, associated with the transboundary movements of LMOs. This section contains information on the experts as well as the guidelines for using the roster, including procedures for nominating experts and for updating information on the experts, the process of requesting and using experts from the roster, as well as information on the voluntary fund for the use of experts from the roster.
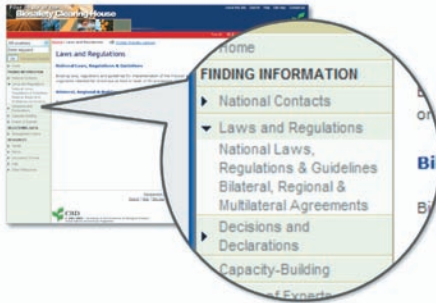
Other resources

Relevant sites and tools: The Protocol stipulates that the BCH shall provide access, where possible, to other international bio-safety information exchange mechanisms (Article 20.2). To this end, this category provides links to international and national web-sites that provide information relevant to biosafety. Organizations are encouraged to submit details of relevant websites and other relevant information.

Bibliographic information: The bibliographic database allows users to conduct searches for bibliographic information related to biosafety.

Downloadable files: The list of available downloadable files includes printable forms (such as nomination forms for the roster of experts), biosafety-related documents (such as the Capacity-Building Action Plan), and PDF extracts from the databases that are updated daily (such as lists of focal points and competent national authorities).

HOW TO FIND INFORMATION

Searching the databases

The first step is selecting the category of information to search for in the left navigation bar. After selecting the appropriate category, a search screen will appear. From this search screen, a search for a record can be conducted using free text terms, or by using the special controlled vocabularies (i.e. consistent terms that have been trans-lated into different languages and are used to describe the content of the records).

Using the quick search

The BCH offers a **Quick search** option on the top left-hand corner of the home page, which allows a user to either search all the records in the database for a particular keyword, or to bring up all the records registered for a particular country. **Advanced search** facilities are also offered to track down a specific record if required.

Accessing information offline

Countries with unreliable or no Internet connection have the following options for offline access to information available in the Central Portal:

(1) Specific information can be requested from the Secretariat by phone, fax, email or post mail.

(2) The Secretariat also sends out, periodically and upon request, an **Offline version of the Central Portal of the BCH** on a CD-ROM to countries with unreliable or no Internet access, which allows them to browse the information available on the Central Portal of the BCH. This CD-ROM can be run on any computer equipped with a web browser.

(3) General reference services may also be available through regional helpdesks, online information centers or other organizations providing information services. Assistance in using these services is available from the Secretariat.

Options for Participating in the BCH

There are different options available to Parties and other governments making information available to the BCH electronically. They may:

(1) Register data directly in the Central Portal using the Management Centre;

(2) Register data locally using database templates (i.e. the simplified forms that match those in the BCH) and send data to the Central Portal;

(3) Make data available through a local website and allow the Central Portal search engine to retrieve it; or

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

These options are not mutually exclusive. A combination of options may be employed. For example, a Party may choose to register some types of information directly in the central portal using the Management Centre (Option 1), while choosing another option for other types of information. Alternatively, the same type of information may be registered using different options. Parties may choose to use one or a combination of these options depending on their needs, also taking into account the minimum requirements and responsibilities for each option with respect to the required resources and technical capacity, such as the level of Internet connectivity. Guidelines for National Participation in the BCH, designed to assist Parties and other Governments in selecting options that are appropriate to their needs and capacities, are available on the CBD website at: *http//bch.biodiv.org/national/guidelines* or can be requested from the Secretariat.
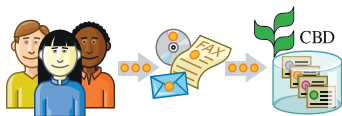
Using the BCH Management Centre

Parties and other users, such as organizations, are encouraged to register information with the BCH electronically. Registration of information through the Management Center is restricted to BCH national focal points (NFPs) and other authorized users. BCH-NFPs can use the management Centre, which provides an electronic, web-based mechanism to register, update, delete, or correct information. BCH-NFPs use this facility to manage all information relating to their country. BCH-NFPs are provided with an account and password to enable them to add, modify and/or delete records. They may delegate responsibility for entering data to other authorized personnel, but remain responsible for validating each record for their government before it can be made publicly available through the BCH website. Users without access to the Internet may also submit information directly to the Secretariat for inclusion in the central database.

National focal points can request a user account by sending an email to the Secretariat (*bch@biodiv.org*) from an email address previously provided to the Secretariat, or by sending a signed letter or fax. Other participants in the pilot phase of the BCH should contact their BCH national focal point or the Secretariat for assistance. An account is required only to register information – all of the records in the BCH are freely available for public search and retrieval without an account.

The BCH also contains an **online toolkit** that provides detailed instructions on how to register information with the BCH. Assistance in using the toolkit can be requested from the Secretariat.

Registering information offline

For countries and other users with expensive, unreliable or no permanent Internet connection, it is possible to make information available to the BCH offline. It can be submitted to the Secretariat by post, fax or e-mail. The Secretariat also developed a software tool, referred to as the "Simple National Biosafety Clearing-House Application (nBCH)", which allows users to enter and store national information locally without being connected to the web and then transfer it to the Central Portal of the BCH later. This can be done either via Internet upload when the connection becomes available or by mailing information on a diskette or CD ROM to the Secretariat for uploading into the BCH. A copy of the nBCH can be obtained on a CD-ROM from the Secretariat or it can be downloaded from the BCH website: *http://bch.biodiv.org/national/*. A User's Guide for the nBCH is also available at the same website.

MAKING THE BCH AN EFFECTIVE TOOL: A CALL TO ACTION

Effective implementation of the Biosafety Protocol relies heavily on the sharing of relevant information in an efficient and timely manner. The tool – the BCH – is now available to make this possible. The challenge and responsibility lies with Parties, Governments and other relevant stakeholders to make full use of it and to actively contribute information to it. This guide is intended to provide a general overview of what the BCH is, how it works, the types of information available through it and how it can be used to find and to register information. Details about the BCH and a step-by-step Toolkit on how to use it can be obtained from the Secretariat.

Further information about the Protocol and the Biosafety
Clearing-House is available from the Secretariat, or on the
Biosafety Protocol homepage at *http://www.biodiv.org/
biosafety.*

The pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House can
be accessed at: *http://bch.biodiv.org*.

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