

Secretariat proposal for the arrangements for the 73rd meeting of the Standing Committee (SC73)

Background

Further to the decision to postpone the 31st meeting of the Animals Committee (AC31) and 25th meeting of the Plants Committee (PC25) until 2021 (see Notification 2020/45 and 2020/46), the Secretariat has turned its attention to the preparations for the 73th meeting of the Standing Committee (SC73), currently scheduled for 5-9 October in Geneva, Switzerland.

Whilst the situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is improving in the Secretariat's host country of Switzerland so far, the borders will only be open to some countries in mid-June and other countries around the world remain in some form of lockdown. It is therefore unlikely that a meeting of the SC can be held in the same circumstances as those which prevailed when the Committee last met in Geneva for SC69 (27 November - 1 December 2017).

Mandate

In accordance with Resolution Conf. 18.2 on *Establishment of committees*, the Standing Committee (SC) is the senior inter-sessional committee reporting to the Conference of the Parties (CoP), with responsibility for providing general policy and operational direction to the Secretariat, advising on emerging operational or policy issues, and overseeing the Secretariat's budget. It is therefore important for the functioning of the Convention that the SC remains active and operational, particularly in times of uncertainty such as those currently being experienced.

Resolution Conf. 18.2 further states that subject to confirmation of the necessary financial provisions by the CoP, the SC shall normally hold two regular meetings between regular meetings of the CoP, and that the duration of regular meetings of the SC should be five days.

Initial analysis of possible scenarios

The Secretariat offers the following analysis of possible scenarios for the organization of SC73. These start from a scenario the most removed from a 'normal' meeting to a scenario which is closest to a 'normal' meeting. Members are invited to refer also to the extensive background material in the Secretariat's proposal for AC31 and PC25 that was circulated by the Chair of the SC by email of 1 May 2020. This is again circulated with this message for ease of reference.

Scenario 1: Postponement

As with AC31 and PC25, in this scenario SC73 would be postponed until 2021.

Concerning the venue and logistics for 2021, at present the Centre International de Conférences (CICG) in Geneva is booked for the SC for Monday 25 - Friday 29 October 2021, although the Secretariat is in the process of swapping this reservation for one in September 2021 prior to the expected date for submission of documents for CoP19 (Costa Rica have indicated that if they are to host CoP19, this must be in March 2022). If no meeting is held in 2020, then subject to financial considerations, an extended meeting in 2021

with sessions in the evenings or adjoining weekends could be held in order to complete the Committee's business.

Alternatively, a Party could host the SC in 2021: the main meeting of the year in September 2021 and/or for a 'mini-meeting' in spring 2021 (CICG is undergoing renovation from January-June 2021).

In the meantime, some of the business of the SC could be undertaken using the decision-making procedure outlined in Rule 20 of the Committee's Rules of Procedure.

Conservation-related risks: High. Given the large volume of work delegated to the SC by CoP18, it is likely that a substantial part of this inter-sessional programme would need to be deferred until after CoP19. The SC has lead responsibility for a number of significant compliance processes, many of them being actively implemented. Suspending action on these would not only have potential negative impacts on the conservation of the species concerned but may also be perceived to be unfair on those Parties currently subject to compliance measures, who were hoping to have these revised at SC73 in response to their efforts to improve their implementation. A number of other issues are highly time-sensitive including the implications of COVID-19 for the implementation of the Convention, and the Standing Committee's oversight of some species-specific cases.

COVID-19 pandemic-related risks: Low. It would be hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic would have subsided by autumn 2021.

Financial risk: Low. Funds from the savings of the 2020 meetings could be re-phased between financial years for the same activity if approved by the SC's Financial and Budget Subcommittee.

Risks to fair, inclusive and equitable decision-making: Low to medium. Postponement in order to enable a full face to face meeting in 2021 is in line with current practice. The ongoing challenge of participation in CITES inter-sessional committee meetings depending on the delegate having the financial ability to pay for travel and subsistence to attend the meeting remains.

Scenario 2: Online meeting during the period 5-9 October 2020 with sessions of limited duration.

An increasing number of intergovernmental organizations are successfully holding online meetings in different formats to address some of the challenges (Annex). Modalities were explained in the Secretariat's proposal for AC31 and PC25, which is attached for ease of reference. Technical backup and interpretation would be provided from CICG, hence the need to maintain the dates that have been booked at that facility.

Online sessions could be of limited duration, split over several days and/or set at a time convenient for different time zones. An online meeting with limited sessions would only be able to undertake some of the SC's inter-sessional work and would need to focus on ways to progress the SC workplan. Both before and after an online meeting, some of the SC's outstanding business could be undertaken using the decision-making procedure outlined in Rule 20 of the Committee's Rules of Procedure, although as stated in that Rule, this would be restricted to cases where the urgency of a matter requires a decision to be made between meetings of the Committee.

Conservation-related risks: Medium. Online sessions of limited duration would not be able to cover all the substantial work delegated to the SC by CoP18 and many sensitive compliance-related matters may not

lend themselves to be addressed in this manner. Suspending action on these and highly time-sensitive matters would be impacted as mentioned above.

COVID-19 pandemic related risks: Low, as no delegate travel is involved and if the meeting is run from CICG, significant COVID-19 related health protocols are in place for staff servicing the meeting.

Financial risks: None, as the costs of the online meetings can be covered by the core budget available for the SC73. Further, reimbursement can be made to members and observers from least developed countries to offset internet connection costs during the meeting.

Risks to fair, inclusive and equitable decision-making: Low to medium. There are risks related to lack of digital equity. In this scenario, there may be limits to the number of observers that could intervene given the constraints on number of speakers, duration of the online meetings, connection capacity and time management by the Chairs. Participation in an online meeting therefore may not be equal to participation recorded in recent physical meetings. UNEP has recently approved the use of funds for compensating eligible developing country participants to boost their bandwidth and connect into virtual meetings. Further, due to the increasing need and urgency by various UNEP entities, UNEP Corporate Services Division has informed that UNON Division of Conference Services (DCS) has kindly availed itself to administer the process for acquiring Interpretfy services, a virtual meeting platform with simultaneous interpretation support.

Scenario 3: Hybrid in person/online meeting during the period 5-9 October 2020.

An important difference between the composition of the AC and PC and that of the SC is that whilst the former committees are comprised of individual persons, the Members of the latter are Parties themselves. All Parties with the exception of eight (Palau, Papua New Guinea, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Sao Tome and Principe, Suriname and Tonga), none of who are currently SC Members, are represented in Geneva by their Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva. Through these missions, provided that any local restriction on public gatherings are respected, most SC Members and observer Parties would have an opportunity to physically take part in SC73, regardless of international travel restrictions that may still be in place in October 2021.

Depending on the circumstances of the pandemic, participation could be:

- Members of the committee or their alternates physically present, with delegates from Management Authorities and/or their Permanent Missions. Observer Parties and other observers also present as international travel regulations and physical distancing limitations allow; or
- Hybrid meeting with Members of the committee or their alternates and party observers present in person (from Management Authorities and/or Permanent Mission) and those unable to be present in person, able to join online.

In the event of a hybrid meeting, particular attention would be paid to ensuring that Parties involved in compliance discussions are able to participate either in person (or through their Permanent Missions) or online when the agenda item of particular relevance to them is discussed.

If capacity constraints dictated, then delegation sizes would be limited in order to ensure that Swiss rules concerning social distancing and otherwise are fully respected.

Depending on the number of Management Authority delegates from SC Members that could attend (and in particular the Chair and Vice-chair) and whether the meeting is held in hybrid form or not, the Committee could consider limiting the number of issues that are to be addressed at the meeting. Whatever *modus operandi* the SC recommends, it is clear that the Committee will need to regularly review and adapt the agenda.

Conservation-related risks: Low-Medium. If there are significant amounts of SC business that could not be undertaken through this process, the conservation risks in relation to compliance and some species-specific issues would be equivalent to that of Scenario 2.

COVID-19 pandemic-related risks: Medium. A physical meeting in October 2020 could be threatened by (i) second waves of transmission; (ii) vaccine not yet available; (iii) continued border closures/quarantine measures imposed by the delegates' home countries, Switzerland and transit countries; (iv) sanitary measures still in place to restrict large meetings in Switzerland; (v) limited availability of flights.

Financial risk: Low. If online participation is required, then this is likely to cost in the region of 21,000 USD, which could be drawn from the Trust Fund savings from travel of sponsored SC members budgeted at USD 44,000. Further, reimbursement can be made to Members and observers from least developed countries to offset internet connection costs during the meeting as explained in the scenario above.

Risks to fair, inclusive and equitable decision-making: Medium. In the event of a hybrid meeting, Parties unable to be present in person or those who may experience technical difficulties in joining online can still be represented by their mission who will be able to communicate their position. There may be some digital inequity for non-Party observers, but physical participation at SC meetings is also limited by the ability of such observers to finance their attendance at meetings.

Meetings of multilateral environmental agreements and other international meetings held in an online format. (English/Anglais/Inglés)

Upcoming meetings

- **International Whaling Commission**
 - The IWC Scientific Committee, Conservation Committee Planning Group, Bureau and Working Group on Operational Effectiveness meetings and other meetings.
Held as a series of online meetings from 11-26 May. Over 150 delegates joined through Zoom with interpretation. Delegates who could not use Zoom used other means (dial-in, VPN) to circumvent the problem. In total over 350 participants from around the globe participated with up to 125 on each Zoom call.
- **United Nations Conference on Trade and Development**
 - 23rd annual session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development. 10-12 June 2020
Held as online meeting with Interpretrefy interpretation in 6 languages (English; French; Spanish; Chinese; Russian; Arabic). The informal meeting was held virtually in the form of three brief meetings from 14.00-15.30 CET each day. International organizations and member States of UNCTAD that are not members of the Commission could attend the session as observers. All formal decisions, including the adoption of the resolutions, were made under silence procedure. Guidance for participants can be found here and Interpretrefy technical guidelines for remote delegates here
- **UN Human Rights Council**
 - 43rd session 15-19 June 2020.
Hybrid meeting with coverage on UN Web TV. Member States limited to one delegate per Mission per meeting. Others will be able to follow proceedings online through the regular live audio or webcast services.
- **Convention on Biological Diversity**
 - Meeting of the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Digital Sequence Information on Genetic Resources, 17-20 March 2020.
Conducted as a virtual real time meeting and an online discussion forum. The schedule of the meeting was readjusted in order to enable and facilitate the participation of all the experts who were based in different time zones with virtual meeting taking place from 08.00-12.00 Montreal time from 17-20 March and an online discussion forum 12.30-18.00 Montreal time o 17-18 March 2020. Experts from 23 Parties (Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Croatia, Ecuador, the European Union, India, Japan, Norway, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Saint Lucia, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and 13 observer organizations attended online.
 - Meeting of the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Risk Assessment, 30 March-3 April 2020.
Closed meeting held virtually through a combination of live sessions using GoToWebinar and discussions through an online forum. Experts from 15 Parties (Brazil, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cuba, Finland, France, Jamaica, Japan, Nigeria, Norway, the Republic of Moldova, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania, Thailand and Turkmenistan) and 7 observer organizations

participated. [The schedule of the meeting was adjusted in an attempt to facilitate the participation of experts in different time zones](#)

- Seventeenth meeting of the Compliance Committee under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, 15-17 April 2020. [Held through a combination of live virtual sessions using GoToWebinar and online discussions on the collaborative portal.](#)
- Fourteenth meeting of the Liaison Group on the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, 20-23 April 2020. A total of 19 members participated in the meeting which was [conducted online](#) through a combination of live sessions using GoToWebinar and online forum discussions.
- Third meeting of the Compliance Committee under the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing, 21-23 April 2020. Twelve participants A total of 19 members participated with a further five unable to do so. The meeting which was conducted online through a combination of live sessions using GoToWebinar and an online discussion forum.

Upcoming meetings

- **Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer/ Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer**
 - The 42nd meeting of the Open-ended Working Group, scheduled for 14-16 July 2020. Will be held online in [three identical technical sessions of three hours each, in three time zones](#), with simultaneous interpretation through Interprefy in all six official languages of the United Nations. An online forum will also be organized during the meeting
- **Ramsar Convention**
 - 58th meeting of the Standing Committee
Originally planned for June, postponed to October. Planning to use GogoWebinar in English only. Currently testing Kudo, Interprefy, Zoom etc. and may change if other options emerge as a possibility.
- **Convention on Biological Diversity**
 - SBSTTA 24 and SBI3 were both planned for August 2020. They haven't decided whether or not to have online meetings yet.
- **Basel Convention:**
 - 12th Open-ended Working Group scheduled for mid-June in Geneva, postponed on 10 June to a later date.