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CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)
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Opening Statement by the Ramsar International Organisation Partners

Delivered by Mark Smith, IUCN

Thank you and good morning Mr Chair and distinguished delegates. I am pleased to be giving this opening statement on behalf of the Convention's International Organisation Partners, and to be present at this final Standing Committee in the lead up to COP 10 in Changwon, Korea this coming October.

In the run up to the COP this time around, there has been prominent attention given to a succession of very high profile global issues that have provoked calls for effective and coordinated responses worldwide. Climate change, energy security and food security have all been making headlines over past months and they increasingly dominate international political and policy dialogues. These come on top of pressures from rapid industrialisation in emerging economies and global focus on the Millennium Development Goals. All of these have critical environmental dimensions. Moreover, they collectively form a set of large-scale and long-term drivers of change in the state and use of wetlands and water. It is vital that water policy and water management are able to respond effectively. This represents an important opportunity for Ramsar.

The IOPs urge the Parties to seize this opportunity, by ensuring that CoP 10 succeeds in demonstrating how the Ramsar Convention is an

integral part of the policy framework needed to meet current global challenges.

Ramsar and the processes around it must be able to put forward and shape responses that are compatible with wetlands conservation. If we do not, the Convention and its goals risk being overtaken by events. Decisions about climate change adaptation might then ignore the benefits of the 'natural infrastructure' of wetlands for water storage, flood protection or coastal defence. Hasty responses to worries about food security mean, for example, we might risk ending up with a new generation of irrigation development that does not address the concept of wise use of wetlands. The Draft Resolutions on the agenda here - for example those on human health, climate change and biofuels – give encouragement that Ramsar can play an increasingly constructive role in ensuring that the choices made are sustainable ones.

Indeed, in acceding to the Convention, the Parties have signalled their commitment to protecting wetlands. Contracting Parties, with support from the IOPs, therefore have an opportunity to make sure that the benefits of wetland services are recognised and built into responses to current global challenges that will be sustainable.

But, there is urgency. First, sustainable solutions need to be backed by consistent policies and strategies that cut across sectors. Policies on wetlands and water need to be coordinated and integrated with, for example, climate, energy, food, urban development and economic growth. In practice, success will be strengthened where Ramsar delegates for the Parties work with their climate, energy and development colleagues. They can help them to better understand both the benefits of wetland services, and the threats they face. The IOPs therefore encourage Parties to use the commitments they have made to wise use of wetlands as a catalyst for integrating water and wetlands into coherent approaches for tackling inter-related environment, development and climate issues.

Urgency also demands that we turn dialogue and policy into effective action. The Ramsar Strategic Plan for 2009-2014 offers strategies that will help Parties to mobilise action. However, we need also to look for

opportunities to go further and to move more quickly. The IOPs, members of the STRP and of course agencies of the Parties are extensively involved in the development and demonstration of best practice in the management of river basins, wetlands and coastal zones. Among these are many success stories and many lessons that can be used to catalyse change in new locations and at broader scales. Ramsar should be playing a key role in scaling up these lessons and successes, because it directly connects international and national policy, IOPs and agencies undertaking research and demonstration, with practical implementation of wise use at Ramsar sites. Several of the Draft Resolutions for the CoP urge Parties to seek out new partnerships that will shorten the distance between policy and action. The IOPs are well positioned to help make these connections and we encourage Parties to work with us on learning from demonstrations and scaling up implementation.

The upcoming COP provides a very timely opportunity to demonstrate how Ramsar can make a real difference — to both wetland conservation and to action on global issues. To help achieve this, the Secretariat has agreed to include a set of ‘IOP Supporting Events’ in the agenda for the COP, in the lunchtimes on days 1 and 2, in addition to side events. These Supporting Events will aim to highlight the inter-relationships between wetlands and climate change mitigation and adaptation, and between wetlands, biofuels and agriculture. We invite the Parties to participate in these events - while urging them to use the outcomes to ensure that decisions at the COP enable Ramsar to contribute more strongly to shaping effective and coherent action on the global environmental, development and climate issues of today.

There are encouraging signs in the Draft Resolutions before this meeting and in the dialogue we are anticipating at the COP that Ramsar is reaching out: By engaging across sectors and issues, Ramsar will have more impact. It will be better able to help shape more effective global environmental governance. It will support better coordination with the other MEAs, building on existing coordination with the CBD. A critical next step is certainly to develop coordination with the UNFCCC, as it moves along the Bali roadmap towards post-Kyoto agreements. Much wider understanding is needed in climate change negotiations of the role of wetlands in mitigation and

adaptation. The IOPs are looking forward to seeing COP 10 become a platform for making these sorts of connections and others that will put sustainable water and wetlands policies at the heart of global action on environment, development and climate. We encourage the Parties to help that to happen.

Thank you Mr Chairman.