

## **Urgent challenges to the wise use of wetlands to receive enhanced attention: Best practices in the development of wetland inventories**

The Standing Committee is invited to:

- i. note the progress of Contracting Parties in completing national wetland inventories and the lessons learned;
- ii. note progress in the support provided by the Secretariat to Contracting Parties on the completion of national wetland inventories;
- iii. instruct the Secretariat to continue working with Contracting Parties on the completion of national wetland inventories and wetland extent, to report on SDG Indicator 6.6.1 (Resolution XIII.7) and on preparation for reporting to COP14; and
- iv. provide feedback to the Secretariat on the draft fundraising proposal to strengthen the capacities of Contracting Parties to undertake, complete or update national wetland inventories.

### **Background**

1. The Convention on Wetlands has always recognized the importance of the national wetland inventory (NWI) as a key tool for informing national policies and other actions to achieve the conservation and wise use of wetlands. As early as the 1st meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP1, Cagliari, 1980), Contracting Parties recognized that national wetland policies should be based on a nationwide inventory of wetlands and of their resources (Recommendation 1.5). This recognition of the value of NWIs has been regularly reiterated by subsequent COPs, including through Recommendation 2.3 (COP2, 1984), Recommendation 4.6 (COP4, 1990), Resolution 5.3 (COP5, 1993), Resolution VI.12 (COP6, 1996), Resolution VII.20 (COP7, 1999), Resolution VIII.6 (COP8, 2002), Resolution IX.1 (COP9, 2005) and Resolution X.15 (COP10, 2008). Contracting Parties are committed to carrying out NWIs, and over the past years there has been good progress, with many more Parties completing them.
2. In the context of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through its Resolution 70/1 (A/RES/70/1). At the 52nd meeting of the Standing Committee (SC52) in 2016, Contracting Parties of the Convention on Wetlands approved the inclusion of an indicator on wetland extent in the National Report to COP13. Subsequently, the UN General Assembly in July 2017 adopted the global indicator framework (A/RES/71/313) that included Indicator 6.6.1 on change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time. Given that Contracting Parties were reporting on extent as part of the National Reports, the Interagency Expert Group on SDGs in 2017 appointed

the Convention as co-custodian of Indicator 6.6.1 using data coming from National Reports, which used as a main source wetland inventories.

3. As noted in Resolution XIII.7 *Enhancing the Convention's visibility and synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements and other international institutions*, the Convention on Wetlands is co-custodian with UNEP of SDG Indicator 6.6.1. The Convention contributes to monitoring progress with data from National Reports on extent of wetlands, based on the Convention's definitions and requirements for reporting.
4. Paragraph 40 of Resolution XIII.7 "requests the Secretariat to continue working with Contracting Parties on the completion of national wetland inventories and wetland extent to report on SDG Indicator 6.6.1".
5. The Standing Committee at its 54th and 57th meetings, through Decisions SC54-26 and SC57-47, approved the allocation of funds to support Contracting Parties in the completion of wetland inventories.
6. The Standing Committee at its 57th meeting, in Decision SC57-53, decided to prioritize the topic of inventories for the current triennium in order to allow Contracting Parties to focus on measures to address this urgent challenge, potentially leading to a draft resolution or resolutions for consideration at COP14.
7. The Standing Committee (through Decision SC57-54) decided to allocate time on the agenda of SC58 for discussion of current best practices in the development of wetland inventories and to create an opportunity for engagement between Parties, representatives of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, the CEPA Oversight Panel, International Organization Partners, the Secretariat and others, on tools and approaches to address the challenges faced by many Parties in developing, improving, finalizing and maintaining wetland inventories.
8. This report presents the progress of Contracting Parties in completing NWIs and the support provided by the Secretariat. It describes challenges and limitations faced by Parties as well as best practices and lessons learned. The document also proposes next steps to continue supporting Contracting Parties for consideration by the Standing Committee.

#### **Progress of Contracting Parties in completing national wetland inventories**

9. The NWI is a fundamental tool for developing and implementing effective policies and actions for the mission of the Convention: the conservation and wise use of all wetlands as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development. Without an NWI, it is difficult for Contracting Parties to ensure the effective management of their wetlands. As indicated in the analysis of National Reports included in document COP13 Doc.11.1 *Report of the Secretary General on the implementation of the Convention: Global implementation* presented to COP13, progress in completing wetland inventories is fundamental to the achievement of the SDGs. According to the 140 National Reports received for COP13, 61 Contracting Parties had completed an NWI, 22 had not undertaken one, 40 reported that one was in progress, and 14 that one was planned. This finding was similar to COP12, at which point 61 Parties had completed an inventory, indicating that more efforts are required to support Contracting Parties in the completion of NWIs.

## **Support from the Secretariat to Contracting Parties on the completion of national wetland inventories**

10. In line with Resolution XIII.7 and Decision SC57-47 on wetland inventories, the Secretariat is working in three main areas to assist Contracting Parties, with the support of a consultancy commissioned in July 2019:
  - a. Review by the Secretariat of information from National Reports submitted by Contracting Parties to COP13 on wetland inventories and wetland extent that contributes to SDG 6 (Indicator 6.6.1), to be completed and refined to feed the global SDG database hosted by the UN Statistics Division.
  - b. Preparation of a gap analysis that identifies challenges facing Contracting Parties seeking to meet their commitments under the Convention to undertake, refine or complete wetland inventories and report on wetland extent, and priorities (including funding) to overcome the challenges.
  - c. Development of a toolkit for use by Contracting Parties, that includes best practices and addresses the identified gaps in knowledge through the provision of guidance, support and resources to complete wetland inventories and report on wetland extent.
11. Contracting Parties have provided feedback on the above process through surveys, consultations and testing of the toolkit. The methodological approach is presented under each area below.
  - i. *Review of information from National Reports submitted by Contracting Parties to COP13 on wetland inventories that contributes to SDG 6 (Indicator 6.6.1).*
12. The Secretariat has a mandated role as co-custodian of SDG Indicator 6.6.1 to track global wetland status and trends, which helps to measure progress toward SDG 6. To do this, the Secretariat relies on information provided by the 171 Contracting Parties, which are committed to carrying out NWIs and reporting on progress on a regular basis. In this context, the Secretariat provided guidance and training to Parties for the submission of National Reports to COP13 to enable them to provide data that could be used also for SDG reporting. The Secretariat is working with Parties to complete and refine information on extent that has been submitted to the Secretariat and to identify information that is available in existing inventories referred in National Reports, that has not been used to report on wetland extent. Refinement of this data includes reporting on wetland type using the three main categories in the Ramsar classification: inland, marine and coastal, and human-made wetlands. Through this mechanism, national validated data using accepted international definitions of wetlands will be provided from March 2020 to measure the extent of water-related ecosystems under SDG 6. This information will feed into the global SDG database hosted by the UN Statistics Division.
13. Regarding reporting of SDG Indicator 6.6.1, the consultant has recommended that the Secretariat analyse current challenges faced by Contracting Parties that described an NWI as “in progress” in the National Reports submitted to COP13, in order to tailor the support which they may require to finalize them. The consultants have also recommended that the Secretariat continue to follow up with Contracting Parties that have completed an NWI but have yet to report a wetland extent figure for reporting on SDGs.

- ii. *Preparation of a gap analysis that identifies challenges facing Contracting Parties seeking to meet their commitments under the Convention to undertake, refine or complete wetland inventories and report on wetland extent, and priorities (including funding) to overcome the challenges.*
14. The gap analysis was informed by responses to questions 8.1 and 8.6 in the National Reports submitted for COP13 and an online survey sent by the Secretariat to all Contracting Parties in August 2019 to identify current barriers and limitations preventing Contracting Parties carrying out or completing an NWI. The survey included a self-assessment of how experienced Contracting Parties consider themselves in the development, updating or completion of an NWI, questions about the assistance needed to complete an NWI and to report on SDG 6 Indicator 6.6.1, and space to give feedback on the required content and desired format of a toolkit. Additionally, the consultants reviewed publicly available data for the 150 Contracting Parties that submitted a National Report to COP13<sup>1</sup>. This included data such as income levels<sup>2</sup> (World Bank, 2019), Fragile States Index<sup>3</sup> (Fund for Peace, 2019) and environmental commitment indicators using as a proxy the progress against Paris Agreement targets<sup>4</sup> (Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and Environment, 2018). The gap analysis can be viewed here: <https://www.ramsar.org/document/gap-analysis-to-undertake-refine-or-complete-wetland-inventories-executive-summary>.
15. The 22 survey responses indicated a fairly even split between the three possible categories of experience with NWIs (i.e., “no or limited”, “moderate” or “advanced”). Based on the online survey, Contracting Parties that reported limited or moderate experience on wetland inventory and wetland extent tended to request technical assistance, while Contracting Parties categorized as advanced tended to indicate greater funding as the major requirement. In addition, some Parties indicated limited human resources and a lack of government capacity appeared as limiting technical factors. More specifically, the lack of capacity to produce and analyse remote sensing information appears to be a common limiting factor.
16. In addition, Contracting Parties indicated they face a combination of financial, technical and governance issues impeding their ability to undertake, complete or update an NWI, with financial and technical support being the most commonly cited areas of support requested. The overall analysis of contextual and economic factors compared with Contracting Parties’ progress in completing an NWI indicated that Contracting Parties with a higher income level (see footnote 2) tended to have completed an NWI or have an NWI in progress. Similarly, Contracting Parties that were on track with their environmental commitments (see footnote 4) also tended to have completed or to be in the process of undertaking an NWI.
17. According to Parties, the two most useful guidance documents for undertaking wetland inventories are a) the Convention’s *Framework for Wetland Inventory* (which includes all steps

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<sup>1</sup> Includes ten late submissions of National Reports to COP13.

<sup>2</sup> The income level classification used to assess country context is a global ranking established by the World Bank. It groups the world's economies into four major income brackets - namely **high**, **upper-middle**, **lower-middle**, and **low** - based on Gross National Income (GNI) per capita (in current USD) calculated using the Atlas method.

<sup>3</sup> The Fragile State Index provides information on the enabling environment by considering factors relating to security, economy, politics and social issues. The Fragile States Index is used here as a proxy to assess the likelihood of an NWI being undertaken based on the country context and its fragility.

<sup>4</sup> The implementation of **economy-wide emissions reduction targets** in a country’s Nationally Determined Contribution signed under the Paris Agreement is used as a proxy for political commitment to environmental concerns.

to undertake an NWI) and b) applying *the Integrated Framework for Wetland Inventory, Assessment and Monitoring* in the context of the wise use of wetlands.

18. Responses in relation to how to improve the current framework on wetland inventories were mixed, with no clear trends being identified. However, the following themes were established as being of central importance for Contracting Parties: a) reviewing the NWI methodology; b) providing capacity building; and c) seeking financial resources.
19. Based on the comparison of economic indicators with the progress that Contracting Parties had made towards completing an NWI, the consultancy recommended that the Secretariat focus on 39 Parties that currently have not undertaken an NWI at all or are only in the planning phase, representing 26% of the 150 Contracting Parties reporting to COP13. Those 108 Parties that have completed a NWI or are in progress will benefit from continued Secretariat guidance and capacity building based on the existing resources and the new toolkit.
20. For the 39 Contracting Parties making the least progress to date, the consultancy proposed a two-pronged approach, taking into account the results of the gap analysis:
  - a. A short-term approach to support the 30 Contracting Parties in the high-income, upper-middle-income and lower-middle-income<sup>5</sup> country brackets, where conditions are most favourable to completing a maximum number of NWIs within a 12-to 24-month period. For the high-income Parties<sup>6</sup>, efforts should focus on capacity building to improve political support for NWIs as these Parties already have relatively advanced technical capacity and possibilities for financing. Upper-middle-income and lower-middle-income Parties<sup>7</sup> should receive a combination of technical and financial support, as requested in the online survey. In addition, strengthening of these Contracting Parties' political commitment would be required to ensure sustainable management of wetland areas.
21. Additionally, this shorter-term approach takes into account that some of these Parties have already developed a partial inventory. In these cases, efforts should focus on increasing national coordination and knowledge sharing between stakeholders to gather and consolidate existing data on wetlands to produce an NWI.
  - b. A longer-term approach for the nine low-income<sup>8</sup> Contracting Parties that are in more challenging contexts and will require more substantial capacity building and technical support. These Contracting Parties are only likely to be able to undertake NWIs in the medium- to longer-term future (i.e., from two to five years) with all nine having the highest levels of fragility as measured by the Fragile States Index. This long-term approach should initially focus on building capacity and the provision of technical support, as well as governance support to increase awareness for greater commitment by national governments. It is further proposed to identify one or two neighbouring countries which have already made good progress on NWIs to play a peer-support and mentoring role. As a

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<sup>5</sup> Lower-middle income countries are included because this group demonstrates a relatively high level of completion of NWIs or NWIs in progress (63% of this income bracket).

<sup>6</sup> Australia, Austria, Norway, Oman, Poland, Portugal, Trinidad and Tobago and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

<sup>7</sup> Belize, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Cambodia, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Grenada, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lebanon, Montenegro, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Sao Tome and Principe, Sudan, Suriname, Uzbekistan and Zambia.

<sup>8</sup> Burkina Faso, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, South Sudan and Togo.

result, it can be expected that the overall enabling environment will improve over time, allowing for a second phase focussing on support for fundraising for undertaking NWIs. This approach may take between two and five years, depending on the challenges faced by Contracting Parties.

22. Based on the above approach, the consultants with the support of the Secretariat have prepared a draft fundraising proposal that aims to secure resources to enable Parties to improve the availability and quality of NWIs. The proposal can be viewed here: <https://www.ramsar.org/document/draft-project-proposal-investing-in-national-wetland-inventories-a-key-building-block-to>.
- iii. Development of a toolkit for use by Contracting Parties that includes best practices and addresses the identified gaps in knowledge through the provision of guidance, support and resources to complete wetland inventories and report on wetland extent.*
23. The consultants have developed a toolkit to assist Contracting Parties to implement or update an NWI. The aim of the toolkit is to provide practical guidance and examples of how to implement an NWI, including a step-by-step process and resources to support each recommendation. Good practices and examples on the areas of carrying out and updating NWIs, inventory methods, data collection, Earth observation and use of wetland inventories in decision-making are provided. Examples that illustrate how to solve the challenges faced by Contracting Parties are also included. The toolkit includes an introduction linking NWIs to SDG targets and expounding on the importance of an NWI for decision-making, including suggestions for building the case for supporting and protecting wetlands. The toolkit can be viewed here: <https://www.ramsar.org/document/a-new-toolkit-for-national-wetlands-inventories-ms-word>.
24. The toolkit provides references for specific technical approaches, building on the large repository of technical documentation developed by the Convention over the years, and suggestions on how to utilize and communicate the outputs of an NWI.
25. As recommended, the Secretariat will use the toolkit as a central resource for the development of training materials, webinars and other training opportunities for Contracting Parties.
26. The toolkit was launched on April 2020 and, based on the recommendations of Contracting Parties, the Secretariat is preparing training sessions focused on priority topics that will be organized as online events grouped by language. Following the delivery of online training, further support may be offered, including on-site demonstrations, subject to the available funding and capacity of the Secretariat to deliver such events.

### **Lessons learned and next steps**

27. The Convention's Strategic Plan for 2016-2024 has established as a priority area of focus improving compliance with the Convention provisions on inventories of all wetlands. Likewise, among several key recommended responses to the findings outlined in the *Global Wetland Outlook* is a commitment by Contracting Parties to improve NWIs and track wetland extent. The report highlights the importance of access to reliable, current data and the knowledge this generates to support innovative approaches to wetland conservation and use and also to drive policy support for protecting wetlands. In this context, significant progress has been made to date by Contracting Parties which have completed an NWI, but efforts must continue to support Contracting Parties to initiate or complete an NWI if they are to achieve the conservation and effective management of all wetlands.

28. The results of the consultancy show that the main priority areas to support Contracting Parties to complete national wetland inventories are: a) capacity building, b) financial resources and c) wide political commitment within Contracting Parties.
29. It is also important to highlight that despite the challenges and limitations Contracting Parties face in carrying out or completing NWIs, there is good guidance from the Convention as well as best practices and examples by experienced Contracting Parties and other stakeholders, that can be replicated if they play a peer-support and mentoring role.
30. Given the decision of the Standing Committee to prioritize the topic of inventories for the current triennium and in order to continue supporting Contracting Parties to focus on measures to address this urgent challenge by developing, improving, finalizing, and maintaining wetland inventories, the Secretariat recommends the following next steps:
  - a. Wetland inventories: The Secretariat will continue to analyse current challenges faced by Contracting Parties that described an NWI as “in progress” in the National Reports submitted to COP13, in order to tailor the support which they may require to finalize them and in preparation for reporting to COP14. In addition, the Secretariat will continue working with Contracting Parties that have completed an NWI to complete and refine the information submitted on wetland extent and to identify information that is available in existing inventories in order to report to SDG Indicator 6.6.1.
  - b. Capacity building: The Secretariat will continue the preparation of training courses on wetland inventories (including online training) focused on priority topics and on-site demonstrations, subject to the available funding and capacity of the Secretariat to deliver such events.
  - c. Fundraising: The Secretariat would like to receive feedback from Contracting Parties on the draft fundraising proposal to strengthen the capacities of Parties to undertake, complete or update national wetland inventories.
  - d. Guidance on wetland inventories: The current Convention guidance for wetland inventories would benefit from being updated to include relevant new information on the use of tools and technology such as Earth observation. The Secretariat is preparing a proposal on how to move this forward and will update the Standing Committee accordingly.