

**CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)**  
**35<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee**  
**Gland, Switzerland, 14-16 February 2007**

**DOC. SC35-8**

Agenda item 12

**Report of the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel**

**Action requested:** The Standing Committee is invited to note the progress of the work of the Panel during 2006, and to endorse the STRP Work Plan for 2006-2008.

**Introduction and Work Plan development**

1. This report covers the first year of the work of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) since its appointment by the STRP Oversight Committee in February 2006, as reported to the 34<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee in DOC. SC34-12.
2. The Panel met for its first plenary session of the triennium, its 13<sup>th</sup> meeting, from 30 May to 2 June 2006, in Gland, Switzerland. The report and decisions of STRP13 have been circulated to all Contracting Parties and are available on the Ramsar Web site, on: [http://www.ramsar.org/strp/strp13\\_report.htm](http://www.ramsar.org/strp/strp13_report.htm)
3. During its 13<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Panel established nine Working Groups to progress the different aspects of its work. Thematic Working Groups are led by the appointed STRP member for the theme; other Working Groups are led by the Chair (Heather MacKay) and Vice-Chair (Rebecca D’Cruz) of the Panel. These Working Groups are as follows:

<b>Working Group</b>	<b>Lead(s)</b>	<b>Co-lead(s)</b>
1. Inventory, assessment, monitoring & indicators	Teresita Borges	Max Finlayson; Dave Pritchard
2. Wise use & ecological character of wetlands	Randy Milton	Rebecca D’Cruz; Maria Rivera
3. Ramsar site designation & management	David Stroud	-
4. Water resources management	Mike Acreman	Rebecca Tharme; Heather MacKay
5. Wetlands and agriculture	Max Finlayson	
6. Wetlands and human health		Secretariat & STRP Chair*
7. Resolution VIII.45 and ongoing issues		Heather MacKay
8. Communications, education & public Awareness (CEPA)	Christine Prietto	-
9. Regional Networking	Rebecca D’Cruz	Heather MacKay

\* pending identification and appointment of an appropriate lead expert member

4. During its meeting, the Panel reviewed, under each theme, the Immediate, High and lower Priority tasks for the 2006-2008 triennium, as allocated to it by Parties at COP9 in Resolution IX.2 Annexes 1 and 2.
5. The Panel considered and developed mechanisms, using a standard pro forma, for the delivery of each of its Immediate and High Priority tasks, and also identified certain lower priority tasks which it considered could be progressed during this triennium within the capacity of the Panel members and observers without the need for additional resources. Further work in developing and finalizing these pro formas, which together form the STRP's 2006-2008 Work Plan (provided as Annex 1 to this paper) has been undertaken by the Working Group leads and the leads they have identified for specific tasks.
6. During STRP13 the Panel paid significant attention to the issues of regional networking, especially in developing and engaging the network of STRP National Focal Points. The Panel recalled the importance of this aspect of its current work recognized by Parties during COP9 and reflected in its 2006-2008 *modus operandi* (Resolution IX.11). Although 'regional networking' was not included in Resolution IX.2 as a high priority task, the Panel agreed, in order to progress this aspect of its work with due priority, to establish a specific "Working Group on Regional Networking". The Panel also established two new Immediate Priority tasks for this Working Group (provided as tasks 168 and 169 in the annexed Work Plan).
7. During STRP13, the Panel also recommended two other changes to the prioritization of its work. These are:
  - i) that task 13 (Reviewing the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment's response options in relation to Ramsar's current Conceptual Framework for wise use, and the wise use responses available in the Ramsar Handbooks) is included as a High Priority task (rather than its lower priority status in Resolution IX.2). This is in view of the need recognized by STRP13 to address this issue whilst the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment reports remain topical so as to bring any further relevant materials and guidance to the attention of Parties at COP10, and particularly since the MA's synthesis report on water and wetlands was not available to Parties prior to COP9; and
  - ii) that task 5 (review and repackaging of Ramsar technical guidance where appropriate) be treated as a High Priority rather than Immediate Priority task, since its delivery will necessarily be consequent on, and informed by, the work being undertaken as Immediate Priority Task 3 (review and assessment of scientific and technical aspects of implementation of COP resolutions).
8. During STRP13 the Panel identified those of its Immediate and High Priority tasks for which additional funding would be needed to undertake the work, and provided an estimate of such costs. Following STRP13, the STRP Oversight Committee approved the earmarking of the estimated funds for each of the Immediate Priority tasks.
9. It is most pleasing to be able to report to Standing Committee that owing to voluntary contributions to the work of the STRP from the governments of Sweden and the United Kingdom, combined with an allocation of funds from the STRP core budget line, sufficient funds are now available for initiating each of the Immediate Priority tasks, and

work is now underway to progress these. We are very grateful to the governments of Sweden and the United Kingdom for their support to the STRP's work.

10. In addition, now that more precise costs for each of the Immediate Priority tasks have been defined, it will also be possible now to allocate funds to initiate work on some, but not all, of the High Priority tasks in the Work Plan. I will shortly be reviewing this with the STRP Oversight Committee and will report to the Standing Committee on any further progress when it meets.

#### **Next stages in Work Plan implementation**

11. At STRP13 the Panel reaffirmed the importance of holding mid-term workshops for its Working Groups in order to review progress and determine the ways and means of finalizing its advice and materials for consideration by Standing Committee and COP10. The STRP Oversight Committee approved the holding of mid-term workshops, which will take place in Gland from 26-30 March 2007.
12. The Panel will determine the dates for its 14<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting once the dates for the 36<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee have been decided, so as to ensure that there is sufficient time for its COP10 advice and products to be finalized for transmission to the Standing Committee and/or its Subgroup on COP10.
13. The Secretariat and Panel will also now be seeking ways and means of finding additional funding necessary to progress all High Priority tasks in its Work Plan.

#### **Issues concerning the operations of the Panel under its revised COP9 *modus operandi***

14. As recorded in the report of STRP13, the meeting was highly productive, with a very high quality of discussion. The Panel and its observers worked closely together, with valuable contributions from all involved. It was particularly pleasing to have significant participation also from representatives of Ramsar's partner convention secretariats and their subsidiary bodies.
15. The Panel felt that the excellent work undertaken by STRP13 was in significant part due to the approach under the revised *modus operandi*, and in particular the appointment of members for both priority thematic areas of work (especially including a CEPA expert member) and for regional network development. In addition, the process prior to, and during, COP9 (Resolution IX.2) to identify the priorities for work to be undertaken by the Panel during this triennium was recognized as a significant step forward and of considerable help to the Panel in focusing and prioritizing tasks for attention.
16. Nevertheless, the suite of Immediate and High Priority tasks in Resolution IX.2 together still constitutes a very substantial body of work to be undertaken by the Panel during this triennium. In addition, some tasks are complex and many faceted, notably task 52 on a review of data and information needs, and there are many interlinkages between the work needed on many tasks.
17. Progress has still been slower than ideal during 2006 in getting all aspects of the Work Plan finalized and work on substantial tasks initiated following the first STRP meeting of the triennium. There are several reasons for this: partly the lead time for new Panel members

to get fully up to speed on processes and mechanisms; partly because it also takes time for Panel members to think about, define and advance tasks, given the constraints of their day jobs; and partly the recognized need for more Secretariat administrative support for STRP processes. On this last issue, this should be resolved by the recruitment process currently underway to appoint a Scientific and Technical Support Officer in the Secretariat, the major part of whose role will be to support STRP processes. It is hoped that this appointment will be made in time for the successful candidate to participate fully in the STRP's mid-term workshops.

18. Despite the attention to regional networking and engagement of STRP National Focal Points (NFPs) by the Panel's regional members, first indications are that it is proving very difficult to make contact with many of the National Focal Points, and this is a matter for continuing concern. The 'information brochure' currently being prepared for NFPs by the STRP and Secretariat will help in this, but the matter will need to be the subject of further discussion at the mid-term workshops.
19. In practice it may prove unrealistic to hope to mobilize the NFPs to participate in all the STRP processes. Rather it may be more feasible to obtain focused input from the NFPs on specific tasks that are of particular regional or national interest, and thematic task leaders will coordinate with the STRP's regional networkers where inputs and discussion from NFPs would be valuable. In addition, some innovative ideas for linking to within-country wetland expertise are coming up: for example, identifying organizations such as research institutes or existing scientific networks to link to, or potentially act as, the STRP NFP. It seems most likely that the progressive establishment of a more flexible arrangement, differing between countries depending on the capacity and situation in each, may prove to be the most effective idea.
20. Finally, the establishment of the STRP Oversight Committee under the COP9 *modus operandi* is proving to be an extremely helpful mechanism for advising on and supporting STRP implementation matters intersessionally.

### **Emerging scientific and technical issues**

21. One of the key roles of the Panel under its *modus operandi* is to keep under review and identify emerging issues it considers should be addressed by the Convention. Discussion at STRP13 on such matters focused on the recognition that there have been significant new developments regarding wetlands and climate change since Ramsar COP8, and the Panel has recommended that the issue be brought back onto the agenda in the near future. This and other emerging issues will be further considered during the mid-term workshops.
22. A related emerging issue is the role and importance of Earth Observation (EO - remote sensing) in supporting wetland inventory, assessment, monitoring, and site management. As part of its ongoing support to Ramsar implementation, the European Space Agency (ESA) has been funding the Globwetland project, which is bringing access to Earth Observation products to support managers on 50 Ramsar sites around the world. As part of this collaboration, ESA and the Ramsar Secretariat organized a 'Globwetland Symposium' in October 2006 which brought together a wide range of wetland remote-sensing experts and end-users. There was major involvement in the Symposium by the STRP Chair and a number of its members, and its conclusions (to be published shortly)

have recognized the increasing accessibility and value of many aspects of Ramsar implementation of Earth Observation.

23. The conclusions of the GlobWetland Symposium support the increasing recognition of the interconnectedness of multi-scalar wetland inventory, EO and climate change in the light of the findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA).
24. The high political and public profile of climate change is likely to be maintained and will probably grow, although the full range of the ecosystem services provided by wetlands in relation to climate change adaptation remains to be recognized. This in turn seems set to lead to greater need for contextual information (i.e., global/regional trends in the status of all wetlands, not just Ramsar sites) within which to interpret changes at river basin and site level, and thence develop appropriate response options. Having global and regional inventory and status information readily available will benefit Parties in the planning and management of individual Ramsar sites. In addition, such information will also contribute to regional and national level management of water resources and agricultural resources as the climate changes.
25. The MA results have highlighted the current lack of good information on wetlands at regional and global scales. Continued monitoring of individual sites is essential, but it is also essential to have a larger-scale coordinated monitoring network to provide the context within which wetland managers can understand and assess changes and responses at site level. EO technology could be our best hope for improved global and regional coverage to provide baselines, status assessments and trends in large regional/subregional wetland ecosystems.
26. In this respect, the STRP is also taking a keen interest in the development of a WSSD Type II partnership on global wetland inventory, which was launched by FAO and IWMI with the Ramsar Secretariat during the Globwetland Symposium.
27. Concerning emerging issues of wetlands and human health, the Panel continues to maintain a watching brief on the matter of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), particularly through Panel member David Stroud's participation in the Avian Influenza Task Force (for further information, see DOC SC35-16). During STRP13, the Panel reviewed recent developments on HPAI and reaffirmed the importance and continued relevance of both Resolution IX.23 and the recent Standing Committee decision on this matter. As part of its STRP13 report, the STRP agreed further advice on this matter, which is provided below. More broadly, the Panel is also continuing to develop a way forwards for its priority work plan task on wetlands and human health (task 163).
28. In conclusion, the Panel will be continuing to keep such issues under review, with a view to reporting more fully to the 36<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee.

**STRP13 advice concerning “Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza and its consequences for wetland and waterbird conservation and wise use: developments since COP 9”**

The STRP reviewed developments related to the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza subtype H5N1 that have occurred since Ramsar COP 9 (November 2005). It re-affirmed that Resolution IX.23 remains both a useful and relevant source of advice for Contracting Parties and others in guiding national responses to the emerging situation.

**The STRP reaffirmed that:**

- “the conclusions of WHO, FAO and OIE that attempts to eliminate HPAI in wild bird populations through lethal responses such as culling are not feasible and may exacerbate the problem by causing further dispersion of infected birds” (Resolution IX.23).

The STRP recorded its considerable concern regarding information that indicated that one Contracting Party has adopted formal policies which promote the culling of wild birds and the potential destruction of wetland nesting habitats, counter to decisions taken at COP 9 (Resolution IX.23). The Panel requested the Secretariat to contact that Contracting Party on this matter and to ask the authorities there to reconsider their policy, reminding them, as well as all other Contracting Parties, of the international consensus that exists on this matter and the content of Resolution IX.23.

**The Panel also stressed that:**

- there is critical need for integrated national approaches that bring together expertise from different sectors, especially those related to agriculture, animal disease, human health and wildlife conservation. National responses which are not integrated are likely to be markedly less successful. The need for ‘joined-up’ planning which involves different parts of governments and other sources of expertise remains central to successful responses to the current spread of this virus;
- national contingency plans should be developed, especially outlining responses that would be undertaken in the event of outbreaks or detection of HPAI H5N1, as an essential element of national preparedness;
- there is a need to establish processes, formal and informal, that would allow the rapid sharing between countries of ‘lessons learnt’ as a result of recent responses to outbreaks of HPAI H5N1. The Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza may be in a position to facilitate such information exchange;
- high biosecurity standards by the poultry industry are the crucial response to risk reduction; and
- extensive and long-term data sets and the networks of experts behind these data sets relating to bird movements and waterbird counts are of particular importance (as recognized by Resolution IX.23, paragraph 10) as an essential information resource that allows exploration of possible scenarios of the current HPAI spread, including identification of areas of higher relative risk along migratory flyways, and their role in helping to inform possible policy responses to outbreaks.

**New information sources**

The STRP noted several recent sources of data and information that are available online and may assist Contracting Parties in responding to the current situation. These include that:

1. The **European Food Safety Authority** has recently published a major risk assessment related to the potential spread of HPAI H5N1 to the European Union. The background

report summarizes much technical information, including current understanding of the epidemiology of the virus, including viral survival under a range of environmental conditions. It also develops a methodology for identifying wild bird species which are thought to be of higher risk of transmitting HPAI H5N1 (although it is not possible to quantify this risk in absolute terms). This methodology is likely to be applicable beyond the EU. Surveillance for HPAI in the EU has since been targeted at these 26 species, and such a focused approach to surveillance is cost-effective. One of the recommendations from this work is that poultry holdings should not be built in the vicinity of wetlands.

2. The **European Commission** has recently published guidelines for HPAI surveillance, which contains a range of 'best practice' guidance related to field methodologies and sampling techniques. This guidance is more broadly relevant.
3. **CMS and the AEWA** convened an international seminar in Nairobi in April 2006. The conclusions and recommendations of this meeting are widely relevant, and they summarize priorities for surveillance, early-warning and risk assessments; priority short-term needs; longer-term needs; and priorities for collaboration and communication.

#### **Annex**

#### **STRP Work Plan 2006-2008**

[provided as separate document DOC. SC35-8 Annex]