



10th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

“Healthy wetlands, healthy people”

Changwon, Republic of Korea,
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Background and rationale for the future frequency of Conferences of the Contracting Parties

(see COP10 DR 3 “The frequency and timing of the meetings of the COP, and of regional meetings”)

1. The timing of the Conference of Contracting Parties (COP)

1. Since the 8th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, Valencia, Spain, 2002, the COP has been scheduled for very late in the last year of the triennium, in the northern hemisphere autumn instead of, as for almost all other previous COPs, in the northern hemisphere spring or early summer.
2. This had two significant implications for the smooth running of intersessional processes and the work of the Secretariat:
 - i) First, decisions on the core budget for the next triennium are only made at the very end of the current triennium, making it very difficult for the Secretariat to plan expenditures for the following year, especially with regard to renewal of staff contracts for the year following the COP, when under employment law such decisions need to be made before the time of the COP’s decisions on core budgets; and
 - ii) Second, when the COP is held in the northern hemisphere autumn, the busiest periods of preparation of documents and logistics for Standing Committee meetings prior to COP have coincided with the December-January holiday period, and preparation of the COP documentation and logistics coincide with the northern hemisphere summer holiday period in July-August. This makes it challenging to meet deadlines for document drafting, circulation, and review and to arrange travel for COP participants when many people, including those Contracting Party representatives who must receive and comment on documents, are not available.
3. Reverting to a northern hemisphere spring or early summer wholly avoids or reduces these problems.
4. Options for resolving these problems were discussed by the 37th meeting of the Standing Committee, and in Decision SC37-5 “The Standing Committee decided that the 11th

meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties should take place in the first half of 2012, 3 ½ years following COP10, and instructed the Secretariat to adjust budget proposals and other time-delimited documents for COP10 to take account of this decision.”

5. Accordingly the Secretariat has prepared budget proposals, in draft Resolution COP10 DR 2, to cover the four-year period 2009-2012 and has indicated in other time-delimited DRs being considered by COP10 (notably COP10 DR 1 Strategic Plan and COP10 DR 8 CEPA Programme) where the time period of such plans and programmes need to be considered for adjustment, in relation both to the timing of the next Convention cycle (2009-2012) and to any decision on future frequency of COPs to be implemented after COP11.
6. Thus, depending on the decision reached by Contracting Parties on the future frequency of COPs following COP11, COP12 would be anticipated to be in the first half of either 2015 (if the current triennial cycle is continued) or 2016 (if a quadrennial cycle is adopted by COP10).

2. The frequency of COPs

Current issues of a triennial COP cycle

7. The Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) is the key governance and decision-making process for the Convention, and it is essential that the preparations for, and process of, each COP remain a top priority for the various Convention processes and bodies, and that these processes operate as smoothly and efficiently as possible.
8. However, with the steady growth of the Convention in terms of Contracting Parties, numbers of delegates participating in COPs, etc., without a concomitant growth in capacity and resourcing of Convention bodies such as the Secretariat, there is an increasingly challenging burden placed on all those responsible for the preparatory work for a COP.
9. Under the triennial COP cycle established by the Convention text, this means that for the Secretariat the work to prepare a COP has to begin shortly after the close of the previous COP. For the final year of the triennium the Secretariat needs to focus almost all its efforts on developing and facilitating the many aspects of COP preparations, including fund-raising for, preparing, and holding regional preparatory meetings; fund-raising for sponsored delegates for the COP and making their travel and other arrangements; working with the host country on arrangements; handling and processing pre-registrations; and preparing the COP documentation for preparatory Standing Committee meetings and for the COP itself. In turn this means that for at least one-third of the triennium, very little attention can be paid to other aspects of the Secretariat responsibilities.
10. Likewise, there are significant extra burdens during a COP year for other bodies of the Convention. These include:
 - i) for Contracting Parties this includes the preparation of their National Report to COP, preparatory national and regional consultation work on draft Resolutions, the time and for many the significant cost of participating in regional preparatory

meetings and the COP itself, sometimes with commitments to a number of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) occurring in the same year;

- ii) for Standing Committee (SC) members, there are also the costs and time required for additional meetings (now two meetings in a COP year) and for reviewing and consulting regionally on draft Resolutions being considered by the Committee. For a Contracting Party active in implementation and Convention bodies, for the period 2007/2008 this has meant a commitment to at least six weeks' time and costs for Ramsar business alone (three SC meetings, one regional preparatory meeting, and one meeting of the COP); and
 - iii) for the STRP, preparing and finalising its draft scientific and technical guidance and other materials to very tight intersessional deadlines within the core 12-18 months of a triennium.
11. Since there is no core budget line for COP purposes every three years, there is an additional financial burden for donor countries in terms of requests for voluntary contributions to support sponsored delegates from OECD DAC-list countries, often in the same financial year when there are similar requests from several MEAs for their COPs or equivalents. The Secretariat is finding it increasingly difficult to secure sufficient voluntary funds to cover the increasing costs of travel and accommodation for all eligible Contracting Parties, and it may prove that there will be not be sufficient funds to sponsor all eligible Parties to participate in COP10.
 12. In the early years following the creation of an MEA, it is important to have regular COPs during the period when the convention's mechanisms and procedures are being developed and established. Once a convention matures, however, as has the Ramsar Convention over its 37 years, attention shifts towards national and international implementation of the commitments and decisions made by Contracting Parties.
 13. In recent years there has been increased comment from Parties at COP and in Standing Committee that the Convention should focus more of its time and effort on achieving progress in on-the-ground implementation, rather than on the development and adoption of further COP decisions, with then little time for subsequent implementation before attention must be shifted to preparation and adoption of the next set of such decisions.
 14. There are, therefore, potentially major gains to be made by lengthening the current COP cycle from three years to four (a quadrennium), in terms of cost savings to the Convention and the Parties, reduction of current burdens on time and resourcing of Convention processes, and increased time for national and regional implementation.
 15. It should be noted that for similar considerations some other MEAs such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are understood to be considering lengthening their COP cycles (in the case of CBD from two years to three years).

Benefits and costs of changing the frequency of Ramsar COPs to a quadrennium

16. Under the terms of Article 6.1 of the Convention text, such a change in COP frequency can be made by decision of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, as is proposed in COP10 DR 3.

17. Under that proposal, nothing would be changed in the COP process itself or in the preparation processes for the COP. Rather, the only implication of a four-year cycle would be that these processes, and the pressures and costs they involve, would take place less frequently, permitting more time for focusing on national and regional implementation of the Convention.
18. Likewise, the annual frequency of some intersessional processes, notably the meetings of the Standing Committee and the STRP, would continue unchanged.
19. Under a quadriennium timetable, the Conference of the Parties would need to adopt a core budget for four years rather than three, and it would also need to adjust certain time-limited processes and implementation decisions, such as the period of life of the Strategic Plan, CEPA Programme, and STRP future priorities, to match the revised COP periodicity.
20. Changing to a four-year cycle would not affect the level of the Convention's core budget and the annual amounts approved for it.
21. There are a number of benefits for the Convention and its processes and bodies to be derived from extending the COP cycle to four years. These include:
 - i) More time between COPs for Contracting Parties to respond to the implementation decisions they have made at a COP, in order to develop their national implementation mechanisms, undertake further implementation actions, and be able to report on implementation progress in their National Reports to the next COP.
 - ii) More time between COPs for the intersessional governance processes of the Standing Committee to become increasingly engaged and effective as the experience of its appointed members grows during the cycle.
 - iii) More time between COPs for the delivery of the work expected of the STRP, in particular under its current *modus operandi*, which refers very strongly to regional cooperation. A four-year cycle would allow more time for engagement and consultation with STRP National Focal Points on issues arising during drafting of STRP products.
 - iv) Averaged out on an annual basis over a four-year COP cycle, considerable savings of overall direct costs and indirect costs (in terms of time) to Convention budgets and less need for additional voluntary funds for the COP and regional and other related meetings, savings estimated at approximately 25%.
 - v) Similarly, for Contracting Parties an average 25% reduction in their cost and time burden over the cycle, in terms of costs of COP and their preparations for it, participation in other Ramsar meetings, and time for preparation of National Reports.
 - vi) Similarly, over a four-year cycle, the Secretariat would be able to devote 25% more of its overall staff time and resources to working directly to provide advice and support to Contracting Parties, the timely processing of information on Ramsar sites

for the Ramsar List, and representation and promotion of the Convention in other regional and global processes, conventions, and initiatives – all work which currently under the three-year cycle has largely to be put on hold during one-third of the current three-year cycle. Such direct and indirect saved time, capacity and resources could be used more effectively for enhancing the visibility of the Convention and for global wetland-related work in connection with Standing Committee meetings, regional meetings, and COPs.

22. Concerns have been expressed that lengthening the COP cycle might lead to reduced visibility of the Convention and a loss of momentum and political will for its implementation nationally. It is hard to assess the extent to which this would prove to be a bigger problem under a four-year cycle. If, as this view seems to imply, a Contracting Party is only undertaking implementation because of the imminence of the next COP, then that should be seen as a failure to fulfill the commitments it has made under the Convention to implement the COP decisions made by the Parties.
23. In terms of the visibility the Convention is thought to gain through the holding of a COP, to date under the three-year cycle there is little clear evidence of any widespread or significant increase in visibility occasioned by previous COPs, other than in the media of the COP's host country and largely only for the period of the COP itself.
24. Indeed, a number of the changes made possible under a four-year cycle could not only overcome such a problem, but also lead to increased visibility and implementation action. This might be by:
 - i) raising the status and visibility of regional meetings;
 - ii) using regional networks more effectively; and
 - iii) rotating intersessional meetings such as Standing Committee and strengthening public awareness efforts associated with those occasions.
25. One related concern about a longer COP cycle could be the ability of the Convention to address and respond to rapidly emerging environmental threats or other issues needing COP attention. Under the proposed revised intersessional processes, such matters could be readily addressed by making better use of regional, STRP, and Standing Committee meetings for rapid responses.

3. Implications and opportunities for regional Convention meetings under a quadrennial COP cycle

26. There is currently considerable interest in increasing and strengthening regional-level activities. Moving to a four-year COP cycle might facilitate increased regional collaboration opportunities.
27. At present, regional meetings of the Convention, hosted by a Party in a region, are in most cases designed to help Parties discuss and prepare for issues and topics to be the subject of COP decisions, but they also permit Parties, to a varying extent depending on their timing, to review their implementation progress before reporting on that to the COP.

28. In recent years, most such regional meetings have occurred in the latter part of the triennium, between 12 and six months prior to the COP. Because of the limited staff capacity of the Secretariat, such meetings have to be held sequentially rather than simultaneously. With a number occurring during a COP year, their timing also poses additional capacity and resource problems for Contracting Parties, donor countries, and the Secretariat.
29. Lengthening the COP cycle to four years offers a opportunity to refocus and considerably strengthen the purpose of regional meetings and their role in supporting intersessional implementation of the Convention.
30. Under a four-year cycle, future regional meetings could become mid-intersessional “orientation meetings”, scheduled to take place about two years following a COP (and two years before the next COP). The purpose of these meetings would be to respond clearly to decisions and Resolutions of the last COP and to review the progress on, and challenges for, their implementation.
31. Such a timing for regional meetings would further permit the regional groups of Contracting Parties to identify new and emerging issues important at the meetings so that such matters can be then brought forward to Standing Committee, STRP (on scientific and technical issues, as appropriate), and the next COP.
32. Such a process could be enhanced by the regional groups of Contracting Parties debating and adopting formal ‘Recommendations’, with these regional meetings essentially being conducted under the Rules of Procedure that apply to the COP and the Standing Committee.
33. Such ‘Recommendations’ could valuably be taken for further advice on implementation to National Ramsar/Wetland Committees, where they exist, and provided to Contracting Parties in other regions so that they are aware of the important and emerging implementation issues recognized in other parts of the world.
34. Such a ‘mid-intersessional’ timing of regional meetings would considerably relieve the burden on Contracting Parties and the Secretariat during a COP year, as well as the demands upon donor countries for funding for both regional meetings and the COP, since regional meetings would always take place in a different financial year from the COP.
35. The overall costs of holding regional intersessional meetings in the manner proposed would be unlikely to differ from their costs under the present model.
36. One other implication is that if regional meetings were to move to midway in a four-year COP cycle, it would be very unlikely that a second set of regional COP preparatory meetings in the year prior to COP would be feasible, given the current capacity of the Convention and Secretariat.

4. Options and costs of rotating other intersessional Convention meetings among the regions

37. All annual Standing Committee and full STRP meetings are currently held at the Secretariat offices in Gland, Switzerland.
38. The reasons for this have to do with reducing costs and increasing the efficiency of providing administrative support and facilities by the Secretariat. It allows the meetings to be delivered at no extra Secretariat costs in terms of free use of meeting facilities in the Ramsar/IUCN headquarters building and no additional travel and per diem costs for Secretariat staff and interpreters, within the core budget allocations for such meetings, which are in any case chiefly intended for delegate support.
39. If ways and means can be found to cover the additional costs of holding Standing Committee meetings (and also STRP meetings) rotationally in locations and regions other than Gland, this would confer certain benefits and opportunities. These could include:
 - i) a more equitable balance of the travel costs (and burdens of long-haul travel) of Standing Committee members who are not sponsored, since some meetings would take place closer to or in their own countries;
 - ii) depending on location and venue, a potential reduction in per diem and hotel costs;
 - iii) an increased opportunity to use these meetings to help raise the visibility of the Convention in the host regions and countries; and
 - iv) a potentially increased opportunity for more Parties from the hosting region to participate in such meetings.
40. For such meetings to be held elsewhere, there would also need to be a commitment from a host Contracting Party to contribute significantly to the local organization and logistical and travel arrangements for the meeting, in terms of both staff time and resources. Note that there is also an additional time cost for the Secretariat in terms of needing to work closely with the host country and venue in the preparation of the meeting.
41. It is recommended that if financial support can be found for full coverage of all additional time and costs, then opportunities should be sought for Standing Committee (and/or STRP) meetings to be held in suitable venues other than Gland, in terms of issuing of visas, ease of travel to venue, meeting facilities, hotels, and logistics, including interpretation and rapid photocopying of documents. These could be close to Ramsar sites, Ramsar regional centres or regional initiatives, in order to enhance the visibility of the Convention in Ramsar regions other than Europe.
42. The additional direct cost implications of such meetings in other locations are, however, large.
 - i) On current cost estimates, the additional cost for Secretariat staff to facilitate a Standing Committee meeting (even if not all staff would be needed because some roles could be delivered by local staff) would vary depending on the region concerned, from approximately between CHF 25,000 (meeting in Europe) and CHF 60,000 (meeting in Oceania);
 - ii) It is essential that for Standing Committee meetings the interpreters are experienced in Ramsar language, terminology, and processes, in order to avoid misinterpretation and confusion. Costs for six interpreters (two needed for each language) have yet to be fully assessed, but are likely to be on the same order as those for the total of

regular Secretariat staff, since under industry rules interpreters travel business class whereas regular staff virtually always travel on economy fare.

- iii) Hence the total **additional** cost of holding a Standing Committee meeting elsewhere than Gland can be estimated on current prices to be between CHF 50,000 and CHF 120,000, depending on the region.
- 43. These additional costs might be reduced to some extent in relation to sponsored delegate travel if it were possible to hold a Standing Committee meeting in association with a mid-intersessional regional meeting.
- 44. The additional costs for holding an STRP meeting elsewhere than Gland would be lower, since these meetings are in English only and do not require interpreters.
- 46. The Standing Committee and the Conference of the Parties may wish to give future consideration to whether there should be a core budget allocation made for such meetings outside Gland in the future.