



**Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations**



The International Treaty
ON PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES
FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Item 17.4 of the Provisional Agenda

SEVENTH SESSION OF THE GOVERNING BODY

Kigali, Rwanda, 30 October – 3 November 2017

Report from Norway on the Management of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault

Executive Summary

This document contains the report on the management and operation of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault submitted by the Government of Norway to the Seventh Session of the Governing Body, following ten years of operation of the Vault. In addition, the Government of Norway extends an invitation for the Chairperson of the Governing Body to act as the Chairperson of the Seed Vault's International Advisory Panel.

Suggested action by the Governing Body

The Governing Body is invited to consider the information provided in this document and provide further guidance it considers appropriate. Elements of a possible resolution are provided in *Appendix II* for consideration by the Governing Body.

*This document can be accessed using the Quick Response Code on this page;
an FAO initiative to minimize its environmental impact and promote greener communications.
Other documents can be consulted at <http://www.fao.org/plant-treaty/meetings/meetings-detail/en/c/888771/>*



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I. Introduction

1. At its Second Session,

The Governing Body appreciated the progress made in the establishment of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault for the long-term conservation of germplasm, as reported by the representative of the Government of Norway, and took note of the official inauguration of the Vault, which is scheduled for 26 February 2008. It further noted that the Chair of the Governing Body would be invited to participate as an ex officio member of the International Advisory Council of the Global Seed Vault.¹

2. At its second meeting, the Bureau of the Seventh Session of the Governing Body invited the Government of Norway to provide an update on the recent developments and current status of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Svalbard. In providing information to the Bureau on the status and operations of the Vault, the representative of the Government of Norway also noted that 2018 will mark the tenth-year anniversary of the establishment of the Vault.

3. The Bureau commended the Government of Norway for the support to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and its important role in the conservation of PGRFA, and took note of the future challenges.

4. The Bureau recalled that the adoption of the Treaty gave the impetus to the Norwegian government to proceed with the establishment of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and considered how to further improve the linkages between the International Treaty and the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. It explored several possibilities to do so, and also agreed on the need to further increase awareness of the importance of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. It agreed that these issues should be brought to the attention of the Governing Body for discussion under the Agenda Item on partnerships and collaboration, including the necessary documentation. Such discussion could result in the form of a declaration of the Governing Body or other appropriate outcome, to be included in the Report of the Session acknowledging the importance of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault to the objectives of the Treaty, on the occasion of the celebration of its tenth anniversary in 2018.

5. The Bureau invited the Secretary to further explore with the Government of Norway, other practical means to further enhance the linkages between the Treaty and the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, including the possibility of signing a memorandum of understanding or other appropriate arrangements and report to the Governing Body.

6. The report provided by the Government of Norway containing additional details on the management, operation and future challenges of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault is contained in Appendix I to this document.

II. Guidance Sought

7. The Governing Body is invited to consider the report and invitations contained in this document and provide any further guidance it considers appropriate, and adopt a Resolution, taking into account the elements provided in *Appendix II* to this document.

¹ IT/GB-2/07/Report, paragraph 60

Appendix I

Report from Norway on the management of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault to the Seventh Session of the Governing Body on ITPGRFA

8. In 2007 the Norwegian government established the Svalbard Global Seed Vault with the long-term objectives of providing a safety net for the international conservation system of plant genetic resources, and of contributing to securing the maximum amount of plant genetic diversity of importance to humanity.

9. After nearly 10 years of operation, the Seed Vault has secured about 50 percent of all the unique seeds that, according to the Second Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, are stored in ex situ collections around the world. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault has also generated extensive global interest and fascination and, therefore, contributes to increased worldwide awareness of the importance of plant genetic resources and the role they play in ensuring future food supply.

10. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault is closely linked to the intergovernmental work on plant genetic resources, including the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA). The adoption of the ITPGRFA by the FAO Conference in 2001 and the decision of the 10th session of CGRFA in 2004, which welcomed and encourage the initiative, were important prerequisites for the Norwegian government's decision to establish a global seed vault at Svalbard. During the opening ceremony of the Seed Vault in 2008, the Norwegian Government underlined the importance of the intergovernmental collaboration in the field of PGRFA. At the same time, the Norwegian government recognized the enormous contribution of farmers to the diversity of crops that feed the world by announcing Norway's commitment to make an annual payment to the Benefit-sharing Fund of the ITPGRFA. The guidance and support by the Chairperson of the Governing Body in acting as a member of the Seed Vault's International Advisory Council has proven a valuable contribution to the management of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault during its first 10 years of operation.

11. In this context, Norway submits this report on the management and operation of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault to the Seventh Session of the Governing Body. In doing so, Norway invites the ITPGRFA Governing Body to reaffirm its commitment and support to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault after these first ten years of operation; to recognize and confirm the strong linkages between the Seed Vault and the Governing Body; and to welcome the invitation for the Chairperson of the Governing Body to chair the International Advisory Panel of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault.

Background

12. In the months after the adoption of the International Treaty, a number of stakeholders urged the Government of Norway to consider establishing a secure depository for seeds at Svalbard, the archipelago located in the middle of the Arctic Sea, halfway between the northern coast of mainland Norway and the North Pole.

13. The rationale behind this initiative was the successful adoption of the ITPGRFA, with its rapid entry into force paving the way for a rational and low cost global security storage for seeds. In addition to Svalbard's location in a secure, remote and quiet corner of the world offering ideal conditions for such a depository, it was believed to be an ultimate location due to its permanently frozen mountains, the long distance to most of the world's major gene banks, and the accessibility of modern infrastructure. The Nordic Gene Bank (NordGen) had already gained valuable experience, having managed long-term storage of the Nordic seeds in an underground container in Svalbard since 1984.

14. After receiving the positive results of the feasibility study commissioned by the Norwegian government in 2004, Norway presented the initiative to the 10th regular session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture in October 2004. The positive response of the Commission, which welcomed the proposal, encouraged the Norwegian Government to establish the Svalbard Global Seed Vault with the objectives of providing a safety net for the international conservation system of plant genetic resources.

15. When the Svalbard Global Seed Vault opened in February 2008, in the presence of a large number of global stakeholders, the Director of FAO and the President of the European Union, it was watched by the public across the world due to the direct streaming of the many international media representatives that were present. To Norway, it was important to ensure that the Svalbard Global Seed Vault would contribute to the intergovernmental cooperation on the management of plant genetic resources, including the work of the Governing Body of the ITPGRFA.

16. Thus, at the opening ceremony of the Seed Vault in 2008, the Norwegian Minister of Agriculture and Food announced that Norway was committing to an annual payment equal to 0.1 percent of the value of annual seed sales in Norway to the Benefit-sharing Fund of the International Treaty. The global attention the Seed Vault received with its opening and in the ensuing years has improved global awareness and increased understanding of the role that plant genetic resources play for future food supply.

Progress and results

17. In its first nine years of operation, 73 institutions had deposited more than 930,000 seed samples for long-term safe storage in the seed vault. These seeds represent almost 5,500 species and about 50 percent of the unique seeds that, according to FAO, are conserved by gene banks. The Seed Vault has the capacity to store up to 4.5 million seed samples, and the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food has also, on a case-by-case basis, accepted long-term storage of a small number of seed samples of forest genetic resources.

18. In 2015, the Seed Vault proved its ability to meet its goal of providing a safety net to plant genetic diversity, when the International Center for Agriculture Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) requested access to the seed samples it had stored in Svalbard. At that time, ICARDA was unable to access the seeds held in its own gene bank in Aleppo, Syria due to the civil strife. Thus, thanks to its access to the backup seeds stored in the Seed Vault, ICARDA could begin the time-sensitive process of regenerating the seeds it retrieved. As a further step, ICARDA came back to Svalbard in February 2017 with the first 15,000 fresh and newly generated seed samples, and once again deposited them for long-term storage in the Seed Vault.

Organization and partners

19. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault is owned by the Government of Norway and administered by its Ministry of Agriculture and Food. In order to provide for its funding, management and operation, the Ministry has partnered in a 10-year agreement with the Global Crop Diversity Trust (CropTrust), which is contributing financially, and the Nordic Genetic Resource Center (NordGen) which is responsible for the operations of the Seed Vault. This partnership has proven successful and the agreement has recently been reaffirmed for another period of 10 years.

Regulation and technical specifications

20. The Seed Vault offers long-term storage for seeds free of charge. However, the seeds have to be maintained, documented and accessed by the seed banks that make the deposits. Priority is given to deposits of unique seeds that are of importance for food and agriculture. Other important requirements call for seeds to be security deposited in another gene bank, and made available through the Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing of the International Treaty or through other applicable international laws.

21. The Seed Vault is built 120 meters deep into solid rock inside the mountain Platåfjellet, and comprises three 300 m² halls for storage of seeds. It is located 130 m above sea level and is a safe construction that is built to survive natural disasters, rise in sea level and use of explosives. The temperatures are at all times -18 C, but also with knowledge that, if the energy supply should fail, the permanently cold temperatures inside the mountain will keep the seeds safe for a long time. The facility and its functions are continuously monitored by Statsbygg, the directorate responsible for state-owned property in Norway.

22. After nine years of operation, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault began planning technical improvements in connection with water intrusion in the outer part of the access tunnel. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is implementing a number of technical measures to provide additional security to the Seed Vault based on a precautionary approach. The seeds stored in the Seed Vault have never been threatened and will remain safe while any such measures are undertaken. The measures will be carried out by Statsbygg and will provide for the most optimal maintenance and surveillance of the installation and prevent future incidents of water intrusion due to heavy rainfall and melting of snow.

The International Advisory Body

23. The three partners providing for the funding, management and operation of the Seed Vault will organize meetings for an International Advisory Panel with the aims of obtaining advice, securing transparency and providing a direct channel for the depositors and other stakeholders on issues related to the management and operations of the Seed Vault. This panel will meet at least once every three years and will include experts from institutions that have made use of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault for the long-term security deposit of their seed collections, and experts from international instruments and organizations, as well as other scientific experts on relevant issues. It replaces the International Advisory Council that was operational in the first 10 year period. The Chairperson of the Governing Body of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture will be invited to act as Chair of the meetings of the International Advisory Panel of the Seed Vault.

Further Information

24. For further information the Government of Norway is pleased to attach the technical and financial report of the first 10 years of operation and management of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault.²

²Updated information is also made available at the official website for the Seed Vault: www.seedvault.no

Appendix II

DRAFT RESOLUTION XX/2017

MANAGEMENT OF THE SVALBARD GLOBAL SEED VAULT

(to be incorporated into the Resolution on Cooperation with International Bodies and Organizations)

THE GOVERNING BODY,

- 1) ***Taking note*** of the report provided by the Government of Norway on the management of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and the suggestions of the Bureau of the Seventh Session;
- 2) ***Recalling*** that the adoption of the International Treaty gave the impetus to the Norwegian government to proceed with the establishment of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault;
- 3) ***Reaffirming*** the strong linkages between the Seed Vault and the International Treaty;
- 4) ***Commends*** the Government of Norway for the establishment and its management of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and ***renews*** its commitment and support to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault following its first ten years of operation;
- 5) ***Acknowledges*** that the Svalbard Global Seed Vault is an important element of the Global System for *ex situ* conservation and use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture;
- 6) ***Welcomes*** the invitation of the Government of Norway for the Chairperson of the Governing Body to act as the Chairperson of the Seed Vault's International Advisory Panel and ***requests*** the Chairperson, for the time being, of the Governing Body to carry out the functions as may be required by that role;
- 7) ***Requests*** the Secretary to further explore with the Government of Norway, other practical means to further enhance the linkages between the Treaty and the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, and report to the Governing Body
- 8) ***Invites*** Contracting Parties, International Institutions and other relevant bodies to consider making use of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in their strategy for securing their important seed collections and for the purpose of the long-term storage of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture;
- 9) ***Invites*** the Government of Norway to continue to update the Governing Body on the operations and management of the Vault.