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Item 11 of the Draft Provisional Agenda

COMMISSION ON GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

WORKING GROUP ON PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Third Session

Rome, 26 – 28 October 2005

INFORMATION ON A PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH A LONG-TERM GERMPLASM CONSERVATION FACILITY IN SVALBARD, NORWAY

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1. INTRODUCTION

1. At the Tenth Regular Session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, Norway informed the Commission that it was studying the possibility of establishing an international depository in the permafrost conditions of Svalbard, where countries and organizations might, if they wished, store plant genetic resources under "black box" conditions. This was intended to be a contribution to the security of the world's *ex situ* collections, and would not be an active collection, that is, no vitality monitoring or sample regeneration would occur, rather it would be an ultimate security back-up, to be accessed only in the last resort. Norway would determine the governance structure, in consultation with interested parties, and envisaged an international steering committee. It stressed that the project was currently under study, and that a positive feasibility study had been completed.

2. Countries expressed their support for, and willingness to participate in the Norway initiative. SADC informed the Commission of its very positive experience with the Nordic countries, including the use of some existing facilities at Svalbard. IPGRI, on behalf of the CGIAR Centres, expressed its support for the idea of establishing a Svalbard depository, and its intention to use the facility. The Commission welcomed and supported this initiative, and thanked Norway for this important initiative, which could contribute in an important way to the security of the world's plant genetic resources.[1] The Commission requested its Working Group on Plant Genetic Resources to "be informed of the proposal to establish a long-term germplasm conservation facility in Svalbard, Norway." The information presented in the appendix to this document was provided by the Government of Norway.

APPENDIX: INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF NORWAY

1. The Government of Norway has started the process of planning a facility for an international seed depository in permafrost conditions in Svalbard. This follows up the positive response given by the Commission to the presentation of the possibility for establishing such a security back-up for seeds. The objective is to safeguard plant genetic resources for food and agriculture and to contribute constructively to long-term food security.

2. The FAO Global System for Plant Genetic Resources is making real progress in safeguarding agricultural genetic resources. The most recent developments are the successful finalization of the *International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture,* and the very promising initiative of the Global Crop Diversity Trust to secure critical crop gene bank collections. Unfortunately, however, no physical structures made by humans are completely safe from natural or human-generated catastrophes. Norway was approached by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), and asked whether it would reconsider the idea of an international depositary in Svalbard, which had originally been discussed during the late 1980s.

3. Consequently, a study to assess the feasibility of establishing a Svalbard Arctic Seed Depository for the international community was conducted on behalf of the Government of Norway. This study observed that the depository would function as an ultimate safety net for the protection and conservation of crop genetic resources. Geographical isolation, stable geological conditions, available infrastructure and constant low temperatures would be some of the advantages that this location offers for long-term seed storage.

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[1] CGRFA-10/04/REP, *Report of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*, Tenth Regular Session, Rome, 8 - 12 November 2004, para. 35-36.

4. Norway was given the possibility to present this study and to request views on the initiative during the Tenth Regular Session of the Commission in November 2004. The welcome and support from the Commission has led to a positive outcome in the subsequent consideration of this initiative by the Norwegian Government, which has decided to initiate the planning process for such a conservation facility, which would be funded by Norway.

5. It is foreseen that the facility would be built within a mountain in the form of a reinforced concrete vault surrounded by solid sandstone. It would be located near the small Norwegian town of Longyearbyen. Formerly this was a mining settlement; today it is more of a scientific community with excellent infrastructure and regular transportation links with the mainland. In normal times, the facility would operate at -18°C. However, if the electricity supply fails, the temperature inside the facility would remain at well below zero degrees Celsius. It should be noted that there is prior experience in conserving plant genetic resources in this environment. The Nordic Gene Bank presently maintains its safety duplicate samples at Svalbard. Similarly, safety duplicates of collections from the countries of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) are also held at Svalbard under agreements between the Nordic Gene Bank and SADC.

6. The Seed Depository will store seeds of the crop plants that are most important for food security. It will store genetic copies of seeds that are already being stored in gene banks elsewhere in the world, thus providing an additional safety net for the world's food supply. Such a facility in Svalbard would not be a gene bank in the normal sense of the word. It would be a depository where duplicates are kept – on a purely voluntary basis – for additional security. Norway, of course, would not claim ownership of the materials stored there. The seeds so stored would be removed only as a last resort – if all other samples are lost.

7. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Modernisation and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food of the Government of Norway are moving ahead with the planning process. International experts, stakeholders and other key persons will be consulted, when appropriate, during the planning process. Many aspects are still under consideration, such as the size, volume and capacity of the facility, and its operation and management, including ways to fund its ongoing operating costs.