

## Ramsar Convention on Wetlands COP15

### Highlights: Friday, 25 July 2025

The excitement of the previous day's events seemed like a distant memory on the second day of COP15 plenary sessions, as contracting parties to the Convention on Wetlands dove into the day's agenda. Delegates made progress on organizational matters and considered reports from the Standing Committee (SC), Secretariat, Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), SC Subgroup on Finance, and the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) on Wetland City Accreditation.

**Organizational matters:** Xia Jun, COP14 SC Chair, opened the plenary. Delegates elected Evelyn Ndlovu, Minister of Environment, Water and Climate, Zimbabwe, as COP15 President, and Tadeous Chifamba, Permanent Secretary for Environment, Climate and Wildlife, Zimbabwe, as Alternate President. Plenary elected Ahmad Reza Lahijanzadeh (Iran) and Jorge Elías Jaén Bonilla (Panama) as Vice Presidents.

Delegates adopted the agenda (COP15 Doc.3.1.Rev.1) and provisional working programme (COP15 Doc. 3.2 Rev.1). The RUSSIAN FEDERATION announced its withdrawal as a member of the Convention on Wetlands, stating it cannot participate in an instrument that allows individual States to politicize its activities. UKRAINE requested that contracting parties support the extension of Resolution XIV.20, relating to the damage of Ukraine's wetlands stemming from Russia's aggression. She noted that its scientist who contributed to the listing of 10 Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites) is still imprisoned in Russia. Denmark, on behalf of the EUROPEAN UNION, and supported by the UNITED KINGDOM (UK), condemned Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, expressing concern about harmful impacts on Ukraine's wetlands.

ARGENTINA requested amending the Ramsar website to reflect the double nomenclature for Islas Malvinas, pursuant to UN Directive (ST/CS/SER.A/42). The UK opposed, stating the Directive mandated the double nomenclature for Falkland Islands in UN documents only.

SWITZERLAND called for stronger coordination, implementation, and resourcing at all levels while ITALY highlighted their designation of four new Ramsar Sites.

Papua New Guinea, on behalf of OCEANIA, highlighted their unique relationship with wetlands, and noted Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) rely on wetlands for both culture and livelihood.

Delegates adopted the rules of procedure (COP15 Doc.4), appointed Zambia, Vanuatu, the Philippines, Mexico, Jamaica, and Czechia to the Credentials Committee, and established a Committee on Finance and Budget.

Delegates approved the admission of observers of non-party states and bodies or agencies that met the requirements of the rules of procedure (COP15 Doc.6 Rev.1). Saudi Arabia was welcomed as the newest contracting party.

### Reports

**Report of the SC Chair:** SC Chair Xia Jun introduced the report (COP15 Doc.7), which was noted.

**Report of the Secretary General on Global Implementation:** Musonda Mumba, Secretary General, Convention on Wetlands,

presented the report (COP15 Doc.8.1), noting a decline in reporting rates. Highlights included: receipt of 117 national reports; parties weaving wetland priorities with biodiversity and water strategies and looking into harmful subsidies; increasing numbers of Ramsar Sites; and universal usage of wetland impact assessments. She lamented: patchy integration of wetlands across sectors, underutilization of risk tools; limited use of national inventories; and unsustainable financing undermining the progress on Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs). On opportunities, she identified enhancing understanding of legal structures, increasing international funding, and improving governmental coordination across sectors and multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).

COLOMBIA emphasized efficiency in indicators. CHINA supported enhancing international cooperation. BRAZIL stressed insufficient resource mobilization, capacity building, and means of implementation as barriers to implementation. ARMENIA highlighted the importance of wetlands to water resilience and community wellbeing. JAPAN supported productive discussion on the 5th Strategic Plan (SP5). INDONESIA praised alignment of national report outcomes with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). VENEZUELA advocated for sustained technical and financial support for Ramsar Sites and other protected areas under national legislation. ESWATINI expressed concern regarding declines in national reporting and requested the Secretariat to address the cause.

Lamenting that only 29% of parties include wetlands in their climate strategies, FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) encouraged including wetlands in both climate and agriculture strategies. He called for SP5 to establish targets on wetland restoration.

**Report of the Secretary General on Work of the Secretariat:** Secretary General Mumba introduced the report (COP15 Doc.8.2) and outlined four key areas: ensuring operational excellence in supporting contracting parties; increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes; collaboration to achieve the SDGs and other global targets, and to enhance multilateralism; and mobilizing resources to support implementation of the Convention. She highlighted: the increase in World Wetland Day events and the Women Changemakers in the World of Wetlands campaign; and the Secretariat's collaboration with other MEAs, including: the Convention on Biological Diversity; UN Convention to Combat Desertification; Conservation of Migratory Species; and the World Heritage Convention.

SENEGAL pointed out that lack of financial resources hinders them from validating strategic documents. CAMEROON lamented the continued degradation of wetlands despite efforts to protect and conserve. SOUTH SUDAN emphasized the importance of protecting Sudd, Africa's largest wetland, with support from the Secretariat. INDIA pledged its commitment to increase the number of Ramsar Sites in the country.

NIGER, EQUATORIAL GUINEA, COLOMBIA, ITALY, and others pointed out challenges in updating the Information

Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS). MADAGASCAR suggested simplified systems or fit-for-purpose tools while MEXICO offered to share their experience in updating their RIS. LIBERIA acknowledged assistance from partners on the updates. ARGENTINA noted that RIS should reflect any unilateral action taken by another contracting party on any disputed territory, to avoid potential conflicts on Ramsar Sites.

ITALY urged the Secretariat to improve online reporting systems, information systems, and user interface. ALGERIA stressed that the Convention on Wetlands must be compliant with UN standards, noting the opinion of the legal adviser provided to the 63rd SC meeting regarding the use of UN maps.

The PHILIPPINES highlighted the importance of wetlands to IPLCs, who consider their ten Ramsar Sites as ancestral domains. ZIMBABWE shared their whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach in managing and protecting wetlands.

**List of Wetlands of International Importance:** The Secretariat introduced the report (COP15 Doc.9 Rev.1). CHINA, INDONESIA, MEXICO, UKRAINE, COTE D'IVOIRE, URUGUAY, ARGENTINA, and PARAGUAY provided updates on Ramsar Sites with human-induced negative changes (Annex 4a and 4b).

SOUTH AFRICA queried whether the listing was having its intended effect and called for an analysis of the benefits of listing Ramsar Sites. KENYA highlighted the strategic use of the Montreux Record, and urged increased support for monitoring, restoration, and capacity building. NEPAL requested the Secretariat simplify its guidelines. BirdLife International, on behalf of International Organization Partners, emphasized updating wetland information to achieve GBF Target 3 on protecting inland waterways.

**Report on Implementation of the Communication, Education, Participation and Awareness (CEPA) Programme:** The Secretariat introduced the report (COP15 Doc.10), presented by CEPA Oversight Panel Chair Jean Hervé Mve Beh (Gabon). While noting the progress made, he urged all stakeholders to redouble efforts. CHINA highlighted CEPA's vital role. LAOS described their community engagement efforts, expressing support for further emphasis on youth and Indigenous participation.

**Report of the STRP Chair:** STRP Chair Hugh Robertson (New Zealand) presented the STRP report (COP15 Doc.11), noting the Panel's significant contributions and diverse outputs. He highlighted the Global Wetlands Outlook 2025 and the pathways it outlines for wetlands' conservation and wise use. FAO welcomed the STRP's growing focus on agriculture-wetland linkages and encouraged using STRP outputs to inform Nationally Determined Contributions and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans.

**Report on RRIs:** The Secretariat presented the document (COP15 Doc.12). He highlighted the upward trend of the budget for RRIs to CHF3.9 million and noted that several RRIs failed to submit an annual report. LAOS recognized RRI's work in enhancing regional cooperation, particularly on Mekong wetland initiatives. INDONESIA commended efforts by the Ramsar Regional Centre - East Asia to promote broader participation of diverse stakeholders. VENEZUELA lamented the limited resources for advancing regional activities. Zambia, on behalf of the SOUTHERN AFRICA RAMSAR REGIONAL INITIATIVE, requested timely seed funding for newly-established RRIs. CAMBODIA proposed establishing programs similar to its regional flyway initiative. COLOMBIA emphasized inclusive methodologies and regional analyses.

**Report on Enhancing Decision-making Procedures and Maintaining Effective Operation of the Convention during Exceptional Circumstances:** The Secretariat introduced the report (COP15 Doc. 13). INDONESIA urged prioritizing in-person meetings and using virtual methods in limited circumstances.

**Report on Assessment of Progress on Wetland Restoration:** The Secretariat presented the report (COP15 Doc.14).

CHINA offered assistance in capacity building and called for incorporating technology and traditional knowledge in wetland restoration. UN Environment Programme highlighted scaling up resources and aligning with the GBF.

**Report on Opportunities to Further Strengthen the Convention's Contribution to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and SDGs:** The Secretariat introduced the report (COP15 Doc.15), highlighting the need to: improve wetland inventory and reporting; promote wetlands in national and sub-national sustainable development and sectoral plans, and promote CEPA activities. The UK, AUSTRALIA, SWITZERLAND, MEXICO, and NEW ZEALAND underscored the contribution of wetlands to achieving multiple SDGs.

**Report on the Implementation of Resolution XIV.20:** The Secretariat reported on the assessment of environmental damage to Ukraine's Ramsar Sites resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine (COP15 Doc.16). UKRAINE called for continued monitoring and further analysis. INDONESIA emphasized the financial and capacity-building support needed.

**Report on Administrative and Financial Implications of Draft Resolutions:** The Secretariat introduced the report (COP15 Doc.17). INDONESIA proposed prioritizing efficiency and allocating funds to programs that deliver benefits to all member states. ARGENTINA requested listing whether funding for draft resolutions stems from the core or voluntary budget, and suggested voluntary funding resolutions be carried out according to resource availability. ITALY said the draft resolution on future scientific and technical aspects (COP15 Doc 23.10) needed clarity. With MEXICO, he identified that the CHF3,000 for RIS was insufficient. BRAZIL questioned the CHF60,000 cost for the new Secretary General. SENEGAL inquired about financing for regional initiatives, noting his government had been paying for activities due to lack of mobilization of funds from funding agencies. The Secretariat noted: the cost for RIS reflects IT consultation for automated data translation; the Secretary General recruitment cost aligns with previous processes and recruitment agency fees; and core budget allocations for regional initiatives are distributed over six years.

**Financial Report for 2023-2025 of the SC Finance Subgroup Chair, and Proposed Budget for the 2026-2028 triennium:** Simon Banks, Chair, Finance Committee (Australia) presented the report (COP15 Doc.18) noting the budget represented shared goals.

**Wetland City Accreditation:** The IAC Chair, Libuse Vlasáková (Czechia), presented the report (COP15 Doc.20.2), noting the IAC evaluated 32 applications for new and 18 for renewed accreditation. In total, 31 cities were newly accredited, and all 18 Wetland Cities accredited in 2018 were recommended for renewal. She highlighted exchange of experiences and best practices at the second and third Roundtables of Wetland City Mayors. CHINA suggested developing middle- and long-term strategies and raising the international profile of Wetland Cities. INDONESIA suggested the Secretariat collaborate with the Wetland City Network to develop municipal capacity-building programs.

### *In the Corridors*

After the excitement of the opening day's festivities, delegates rolled up their sleeves and went to work. As participants reviewed reports on work since COP14, positive momentum was evident from interventions praising the increased listing of Ramsar Sites, as well as the work of the Secretariat and the Secretary General.

While the withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the Convention was a jolting start to the day, several delegates found it unsurprising. Balance was quickly restored, with the announcement that Saudi Arabia has joined one of the oldest MEAs. Some delegates noted that international cooperation and engagement across MEAs continued to be a strong theme. Others commented on the contrast to yesterday's lengthy work day, appreciating the able management skills of COP15 Alternate President Tadeous Chifamba. Parties were left feeling hopeful this bodes well for the discussions in the coming days.