

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands COP15

Highlights: Saturday, 26 July 2025

Delegates' workload increased significantly as they commenced review of the 28 draft resolutions. By day's end, 11 had received a first review. Of those, four entered informal discussions. The draft proposal on the Ramsar List generated the most opposition, with further action hinging on a review by the Secretariat's legal advisor. In contrast, the draft resolution on the Waterbird Estimates Partnership (WEP) enjoyed overwhelming support. The total number of draft resolutions grew to 29 with the addition of a draft resolution proposing to extend implementation of Resolution XIV.20 on the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on wetlands.

COP15 Alternate President Tadeous Chifamba (Zimbabwe), opened the plenary. He announced a proposed resolution from Ukraine (COP15 Doc.23.26) would be considered at the end of the running order. Simon Banks, Chair, Finance Committee (Australia), announced the Committee would resume during the day.

Consideration of Draft Resolutions

Financial and budgetary matters: The Secretariat presented the document (COP15 Doc.23.1), noting it contained four annexes on: budget scenarios with proposed nominal increase of 0% (default), 4.1%, 9.6%, or 11.3% (Annex 1); core budget contributions for contracting parties (Annex 2); Secretariat core staff 2026-2028 (Annex 3); and non-core fundraising priorities (Annex 4).

On proposed increases, JAPAN, MEXICO, and INDIA supported 0% nominal growth. BRAZIL said the current 0% nominal growth erodes the financial ability of the Secretariat due to inflation. Zambia, on behalf of AFRICA, endorsed a 9.6% nominal budget increase. SWEDEN preferred a 9.6% or 11.3% increase, noting the state of arrears jeopardizes the ability to raise donor funds, since "It looks like no one cares about the budget."

On alternate funding sources, JAPAN highlighted the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and THAILAND highlighted the role of the private sector. CHINA called for more voluntary contributions from countries and partners. The UNITED KINGDOM (UK) announced a voluntary GBP 85,000 contribution towards waterbird population estimates and support for earth observations.

Italy, on behalf of the EUROPEAN UNION (EU), requested listing the number of parties in arrears and proposed identifying consequences for those in arrears longer than three years. BRAZIL, supported by MEXICO, IRAN, COSTA RICA, and VENEZUELA, advised avoiding punitive measures for countries with fiscal difficulties, saying it would erode multilateralism. MEXICO asked that use of the 2026-2028 reserve fund be subject to approval by the Standing Committee (SC). INDONESIA said the CHF 360,000 surplus fund 2026-2028 strengthens organizational financial stability and continuity.

Fiji, on behalf of OCEANIA, said the Convention must be agile to address the triple planetary crisis and warned that one-

fifth of remaining wetlands could be lost by 2050. The EU said a paragraph on accessible information to ensure transparency and accountability should be moved to a more appropriate resolution and proposed adding Ramsar Awards to Annex 4.

COP15 Alternate President Chifamba said the Secretariat is small and underfunded and appealed to parties for flexibility and stronger ambition.

Responsibilities, roles and composition of the SC and regional categorization of countries: Jay Aldous, Deputy Secretary General, Convention on Wetlands, introduced the draft resolution (COP15 Doc.23.2). Sweden, on behalf of the EU, suggested amendments on: the Ramsar Award categories to be awarded at COP16; the recruitment process for the new Secretary General; and the composition of the SC.

Strategic Plan 2025-2034: Fawziah Gadallah, Co-Chair, Ramsar Strategic Plan Working Group (Canada), presented the document (COP15 Doc.23.3), noting considerable bracketed text. ZAMBIA called attention to COP15 Inf.5 on inputs provided during informal discussions on the draft resolution. A contact group was established.

Enhancing the Convention's visibility and synergies: The Secretariat introduced the draft resolution (COP15 Doc.23.4), noting new provisions regarding the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

CHINA, INDONESIA, the UK, CHILE, INDIA, and others supported the draft resolution.

IRAN proposed including the transboundary impacts of sand and dust storms on wetlands to link with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. BRAZIL called for respecting the mandate of each convention. NEW ZEALAND and JAPAN supported including synergies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

ZAMBIA, supported by SWITZERLAND, ZIMBABWE, Belgium, on behalf of the EU, and others, proposed strengthening synergies with the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. RWANDA proposed synergies with the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions. BANGLADESH encouraged integrating wetland conservation in disaster risk reduction strategies. AUSTRALIA and SOUTH AFRICA urged the Secretariat collaborate with the Green Climate Fund and the GEF. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC emphasized local communities, youth, and women should be considered in developing wetland conservation and wise use strategies. PARAGUAY called for synergies at the local level to reduce anthropogenic pressures on wetlands, and considering Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) and gender-inclusiveness. COSTA RICA called for stronger inclusion of wetlands in nationally determined contributions. UNITED ARAB EMIRATES recognized the importance of wetlands for water security, climate resilience, and biodiversity conservation.

Process for recruiting a new Secretary General: The Secretariat presented the draft resolution (COP15 Doc.23.8), noting no agreement was reached in the SC.

INDONESIA, MEXICO, and BRAZIL supported the draft resolution, highlighting the inclusive and transparent process.

Sweden, on behalf of EU, opposed addressing the issue in a resolution, preferring an SC Decision instead, saying resolutions can become outdated, limiting future use by the SC. The EU also cited concerns about excessive consultations; exceptionally high transparency impacts; and the extent to which regionality and gender should be considered. A contact group was established.

Updating Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS): The Secretariat introduced the resolution (COP15 Doc.23.13). Alyssa Bagley (Australia), Chair, RIS Working Group on Updating, said the draft resolution recommends establishment of a new working group. She highlighted as challenges: the length of time to publish the RIS; the length of the RIS update cycle; the RIS format; and use of automated data imports from other sources. On potential solutions, she noted using essential data fields and drop-down options; flexibility in RIS updates, and opportunities for capacity building, including via peer-to-peer learning and support from Ramsar Regional Initiatives.

The PHILIPPINES and Kenya, on behalf of AFRICA, supported establishing a working group. ARGENTINA, ALGERIA, IRAN, and PAKISTAN said important, complex issues required further discussion, including disputed territories and data sovereignty, and, with BRAZIL, urged formation of a contact group. NEW ZEALAND, supported by the EU, proposed removing Annex 1 (terms of reference of the working group). Italy, on behalf of the EU, advocated prioritizing a limited number of compulsory fields; investing in user-friendly online tools and offline templates; automatic data transfer; and use of opt-out email notifications. The REPUBLIC OF KOREA suggested the Ramsar Regional Center - East Asia practitioner's guide for Ramsar Site Designation and Updating of RIS be submitted for formal consideration to the SC as a convention handbook.

A contact group co-chaired by the EU and AFRICA was formed.

Ramsar List: The Secretariat introduced the draft resolution (COP15 Doc.23.24). ALGERIA, supported by ARGENTINA, welcomed input and proposed deferring its review until the adoption of other related resolutions in COP15. He raised several legal questions to the Secretariat, who will issue a legal opinion by Monday.

The UK, supported by NORWAY, MOROCCO, NEPAL, Poland, on behalf of the EU, and others, requested the draft resolution be withdrawn for going beyond the scope of the Secretariat's mandate. He urged contracting parties to respect the decision of the 64th SC meeting that discussion of the resolution be considered in next triennium during the 67th SC meeting. The PHILIPPINES and PAKISTAN pointed out that the Ramsar listing process is not the proper forum to settle territorial disputes. GABON expressed concern that the draft resolution politicizes the Ramsar listing process, urging countries to promote collaborative work instead.

Future implementation of scientific and technical aspects of the Convention 2025-2028: Hugh Robertson, Chair, Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) (New Zealand), presented the document (COP15 Doc.23.10). Many parties and International Organization Partners (IOPs) expressed support for the draft resolution and commended the STRP's work. Belgium, on behalf of the EU, recommended: prioritizing other effective area-based conservation mechanisms; adding hydrological cycles and influence of land use; and assessing gaps in the network of Ramsar Sites after revisions to wetland classifications. Several parties emphasized the active participation of IPLCs and incorporation of Indigenous and local knowledge.

SOUTH AFRICA, AUSTRALIA, HONDURAS, UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), and BirdLife International, on behalf of the IOPs, encouraged the provision of sustained financial support for the STRP. SOUTH AFRICA emphasized innovative finance options, including public-private partnerships. CÔTE D'IVOIRE and ZAMBIA stressed the need for capacity building for research and addressing challenges specific to Africa. CZECHIA suggested the STRP add a review of urban wetlands. NAMIBIA requested knowledge translation for

rapid uptake of outputs. ZAMBIA, HONDURAS, and UNEP-WCMC supported the production of accessible, user-friendly outputs. The EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY and the JAPAN AEROSPACE EXPLORATION AGENCY underlined their commitment to the GEO-Wetland Initiative.

Establishment of the WEP and delivery of the 2027 edition of Waterbird Population Estimates (WPE): STRP Chair Robertson presented the document (COP15 Doc.23.11).

NIGERIA, Vanuatu, on behalf of OCEANIA, the PHILIPPINES, CHINA, and others, supported the draft resolution, noting the importance of up-to-date and relevant data on waterbirds, and expressed willingness to engage collaboratively with the WEP.

Hungary, on behalf of the EU, proposed ways to update waterbird data to ensure coordination, data integration, and efficiency. NIGERIA, BOTSWANA, ZIMBABWE, and others highlighted the need to work closely with the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement. AUSTRALIA and the UK announced their contributions to the work of WEP, of CHF 105,000 and GBP 85,000, respectively. WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL said with this initial fund, together with their own contribution of EUR 50,000, work can start on the WEP and the 2027 WPE. BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL noted more funds are needed, potentially from the surplus funds, and encouraged more contributions.

Application of Criteria 6 and 9 to new and existing Wetlands of International Importance: STRP Chair Robertson presented the document (COP15 Doc.23.12), highlighting the inclusion of wetland-dependent non-avian species. The PHILIPPINES, SOUTH AFRICA, MADAGASCAR, and CANADA, with amendments, supported the resolution. Belgium, on behalf of the EU, also proposed amendments, including anchoring consistent application of the criteria in trusted data sources, such as International Union for Conservation of Nature databases. The PHILIPPINES, THAILAND, and MADAGASCAR emphasized the need for capacity building and financial support. AUSTRALIA expressed concerns about the suggested frequency of data updates, citing considerable fluctuations in bird populations, and called for balancing needs with financial implications of the resolution.

Restoration of degraded freshwater ecosystems to support ecological character biodiversity and ecosystem services: GABON introduced the document (COP15 Doc.23.15). CHINA, NEPAL, LIBERIA, INDIA, CUBA, Wetlands International, on behalf of IOPs, and others, supported the adoption of the draft resolution. CANADA, NEW ZEALAND, Finland, on behalf of the EU, ZAMBIA, AUSTRALIA, SEYCHELLES, and others, said they will submit separate amendments. ARGENTINA proposed modifying the proposed quantitative targets, saying they are beyond the mandate of the Convention, preferring targets already submitted to the Convention on Biological Diversity. NIGER urged allocating funding to restore degraded ecosystems.

In the Corridors

As COP15 moved steadily forward with initial review of more than a third of the draft resolutions completed, whispers could be heard about the beast lurking just out of sight. Some participants wondered whether the crocodile basking motionless in the sun on the conference grounds was an image for misplaced assumptions of progress. "Ramsar is a civil process," said one delegate. "Even when we disagree, we do so politely. But it doesn't mean resolution of these deep-seated differences will be easy." One cited negotiations on the fifth Strategic Plan as an issue that could fragment the meeting. Others appreciated the policy established by the Secretariat to ensure that contentious topics had adequate time for discussion. One topic of conversation generated total agreement: the sunny, camp-like venue of COP15 promoted a sense of relaxation and camaraderie. Even if progress proves to be illusory, participants seemed to be enjoying the process.