



The Process for Becoming an Observer at a CITES Meeting

What is CITES, and how is it administered?

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international treaty aimed at regulating the international trade in protected species. CITES entered into effect July 1, 1975, with the United States as one of the original 10 Party countries. Today, 183 nations and the European Union are Parties to CITES.

CITES, administered through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The original documents are held by Switzerland as the Depositary Government, with texts in five languages: Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. English, French, and Spanish are the official working languages of CITES.

CITES is one of the few conservation treaties with a permanent Secretariat. The Secretariat provides Parties with trade information and technical support, liaises among Parties, contracts trade studies, informs governments and the public about CITES wildlife trade developments, and organizes meetings of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) and subsidiary bodies. The Secretariat also investigates possible CITES violations and trade threats to wildlife.

When are conferences held?

The CITES Parties meet approximately every two to three years at a CoP. During this two-week long meeting, the Parties review and vote on proposed resolutions and decisions to improve how CITES works, resolve policy issues, and review and vote on proposals to amend Appendices I and II - the listings of CITES protected species.



The elephant-shaped CITES logo was first used at CoP3 in 1981. The original version, a simple black and white design, has since evolved to include species protected by CITES.

CoPs are usually hosted by a Party. The United States hosted the plenipotentiary meeting in 1973 when CITES first was negotiated, which is why CITES is often referred to as the Washington Convention.

Attending each CoP are delegations of the Parties, representatives of the CITES Secretariat and United Nations bodies, representatives of countries not party to CITES, and representatives of approved national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who attend as observers.

What is the role of observers?

Observers at a CoP may attend all plenary and committee sessions, and participate in those discussions. However, observers do not participate in the decision making and may not vote. The U.S. Delegation provides daily briefings at a CoP to share information regarding the conduct of the meeting and provide U.S. observers with an opportunity to discuss particular agenda items or raise issues.

How do I apply for observer approval?

CITES Article XI, Paragraph 7 outlines the technical qualifications necessary to attend a CoP as an observer. Entities seeking observer status must be technically qualified in protection, conservation, or management of wild fauna and flora. Observers may include NGOs, industry, and academia. A U.S. based entity applying for observer status must obtain approval from the U.S. Management Authority. Requests for observer approval must include information detailing how the entity meets the technical requirements and must also include copies of its charter and bylaws, as well as a list of the representatives it intends to send to the CoP.

Observer requests for U.S. based entities must be sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Management Authority (DMA), at the address on this fact sheet or via email to managementauthority@fws.gov.



Frank Kohn, USFWS

CoP19, Panama, 2022

Participants at CoP19, Panama, 2022/Frank Kohn, USFWS



National entities headquartered in other countries must request observer approval from their respective CITES Management Authority, and international entities must request observer approval from the CITES Secretariat.

What is the process after I receive U.S. observer approval?

An organization that has received approval to attend a CoP as a U.S. observer must provide the approval letter to the Secretariat along with a request to register for the meeting.

Additionally, the approved observer organization must provide a nomination or credentials letter from their organization. This is a letter, on the official letterhead of the observer organization, confirming that the delegation members identified in the registration request have been authorized on the part of the organization to attend the meeting and speak on its behalf.

The nomination/credentials letter may not be signed by a member of the

organization's delegation to the CoP.

All observer requests must be received by the Secretariat at least 60 days before the start of the CoP, but should not be sent more than four to five months before the start of the meeting.

The Secretariat will also provide information and instructions for paying any observer registration fee for the CoP.



U.S. Delegation at CoP19/Frank Kohn, USFWS

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