



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 was put into effect July 1, 1975, with the United States as one of the original 10 Party countries. Today, 180 countries are Parties to CITES.

CITES, administered through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The original documents are held there, 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, interfaces 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). The Secretariat also investigates possible CITES violations and trade threats to wildlife.

When are conferences held?

The CITES Parties meet approximately every 2 to 3 years at a CoP. During this 2-week long meeting, they review and vote on proposed resolutions and decisions to improve how CITES works, review and vote on proposed amendments to the listings of CITES protected species, and resolve policy issues.

Each CoP is hosted by a Party. The United States hosted the plenipotentiary meeting in 1973 when the CITES treaty first was negotiated, and CoP9 in 1994.



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.

Attending each CoP are delegations of the Parties, representatives of the CITES Secretariat and UNEP 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 comment in these sessions on any of the issues. However, they are not permitted to vote on proposals. The U.S. Government's delegation provides daily briefings at each CoP for U.S. observers (both national and international NGOs based in the United States).

How do I apply for observer status?

Article XI, Paragraph 7, of CITES



CITES CoP14 Meeting, The Hague, Netherlands, 2007

outlines the technical qualifications necessary to attend a CoP as an observer. CITES requires an NGO to be technically qualified in protection, conservation, or management of wild fauna and flora. An NGO applying for observer status should provide materials with its application that detail how it meets these technical requirements. It should also include copies of its charter and bylaws, as well as a list of representatives it intends to send to the CoP. Individuals who are not affiliated with an NGO do not qualify for approval as observers.

An NGO may apply for observer status in one of the following ways:

1. International NGOs with offices in more than one country should apply to the CITES Secretariat at the following address:

CITES Secretariat
International Environment House
11 Chemin des Anémones
CH-1219 Châtelaine-Geneva
Switzerland
tel: (+4122) 917-8139
fax: (+4122) 797-3417
E-mail: info@cites.org

2. NGOs based in a country other than the United States should apply to the CITES Management Authority of that country.

3. NGOs based in the United States should apply to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Management Authority (DMA), at the address shown on this fact sheet or e-mail the request to managementauthority@fws.gov.

How long before observer status is approved?

The Secretariat's heavy logistical workload preparing for a CoP—including its preparation of observer registration forms—means that applications for



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U.S. Delegates to CoP 15 in Doha, Qatar, discuss a position paper during a break, 2010

observer status usually are not approved more than 4 or 5 months before a CoP.

However, U.S.-based NGOs can expect that once DMA receives their application, it will be reviewed and processed, and the NGO promptly notified of the Service's decision.

Any NGO that has attended a previous CoP and is applying to DMA for observer status needs to do only the following:

1. Send DMA a letter requesting observer status.
2. Provide a list of representatives it intends to send to the CoP.

Since its technical qualifications have been previously reviewed by the Service, the NGO may expect approval of its observer status to be automatic in most cases.

How will I know?

Once DMA approves an NGO, we will send a formal approval letter that includes links to the CoP registration form and the hotel booking information, as well as other information regarding attendance.

The NGO must complete the registration form and provide the CITES Secretariat with a copy of DMA's approval letter. The Secretariat's deadline for observer registration is 6 weeks prior to the opening of the CoP.

The Secretariat charges each approved observer a registration fee, which may vary from CoP to CoP (the registration fee for CoP16 was set at a minimum of \$600 for the initial NGO representative and a minimum of \$300 for each additional representative). The Secretariat usually accepts the registration fee either by bank transfer to the CITES Secretariat or cash at the time of registration at the CoP. For any given CoP, the NGO observer should consult with the Secretariat about paying the registration fee.

Since all CoP documents can now be accessed online, the Secretariat will not provide hard copies of any documents before the CoP. However, documents prepared at the CoP will be provided in hard copy at the meeting.

Each observer approved by the Service will be added automatically to DMA's mailing list and, on a periodic basis, receive notification of the latest CITES-related information leading up to the CoP.

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