Media Briefing for COP18

1. What are peatlands?

Peatlands are waterlogged wetland areas with organic soils (peat), which result from the accumulation of dead plant material over thousands of years. Peatlands cover about 3% of the total global land surface (over 4 million km2), which makes up about half of the world's wetlands. Although 60% of the world's peatlands are in Russia, Canada, the USA and Indonesia, they occur in over 180 countries stretching from boreal and subarctic regions to tropical zones, including in high mountain areas.

2. Peatlands and climate change

The amount of carbon stored in peatlands is around 550 Gt; double the amount of carbon stored in the biomass of all the world's forests.

Two billion tonnes of CO2 are emitted annually as a result of peatland drainage and reclamation, mainly for forestry and agriculture. This is equivalent to 6% of the global anthropogenic CO2 emissions, and represents almost 25% of the total carbon emissions from the land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) sector. Half of these emissions come from a mere 13 million hectares of degrading tropical peatlands, mainly in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Unlike deforestation, which causes one-off and almost immediate emissions, the emissions from drained peatlands continue for decades and even centuries as long as the land remains drained and the peat keeps oxidising. Fertilisers for agriculture on peatlands lead to high emissions of nitrous oxide, while drainage channels result in emissions of methane; both very potent GHGs.

3. Peatlands in the UNFCCC

The UNFCCC framework contains a variety of instruments and initiatives that are relevant to peatlands. These are typically divided in instruments that apply to developing countries and others that apply to developed countries.

Developing countries: Peatlands and REDD+

REDD+ is a UN initiative to Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries. As the name indicates, the initiative concerns only forest areas, and in its early stages it only addressed above-ground biomass.

At the UNFCCC COP17 in Durban, Wetlands International successfully advocated the inclusion of *all significant [carbon] pools* in the accounting of GHG fluxes in REDD+ projects, thereby ensuring that forestry activities impacting below-ground carbon would not be promoted by REDD+.

Developing countries: Peatlands and NAMAs

Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs) are mitigation actions for which developing countries can request assistance to carry out. These can encompass any sector of activity. Due to their wide scope, NAMAs can play a crucial role in the conservation,

rehabilitation and sustainable use of non-forested peatlands, which are not addressed in REDD+. Indonesia has already put in practice such an approach.

Developed countries: Peatlands and LULUCF

Developed countries must report on the emissions and removals from their land use, land use change and forestry sector (LULUCF). In the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (2008-2012), developed countries that had emissions reduction commitments under the Protocol could choose to count those emissions and removals when accounting for their progress towards their emissions reduction targets.

Since accounting for LULUCF emissions was voluntary, countries invariably chose to account for LULUCF activities that delivered removals (such as afforestation or reforestation), but not to account for activities that increased emissions.

At the UNFCCC COP17 in Durban, Parties decided that in the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol all forest management activities must be accounted for – including forests on peat soils. The Parties also decided that accounting for cropland and grazing land management should remain voluntary, but they added the new activity "Wetlands Drainage and Rewetting" to the list of voluntary accounting activities. This means that developed countries now have an incentive to rehabilitate their peatlands, thereby significantly reducing emissions, because they can now count those removals against their emissions reduction targets.

4. What Doha needs to deliver for peatlands

Doha will see the end of the negotiating track on Long-term Cooperative Action (LCA), which oversees decisions on the future of REDD+. Therefore, Parties must decide which issues to resolve in Doha and which ones to allocate to the Subsidiary Bodies for further work.

Wetlands International is advocating for a Doha decision that ensures that the monitoring, reporting and verifying (MRV) rules appropriately take organic soils into account, so that the disproportionate emissions from peatlands are not ignored when calculating the carbon emissions from forests. We detailed our position on these issues, as well as on the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation, in a submission in February 2012.

Together with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) we are incentivising several countries to adopt peatland NAMAs.

Wetlands International has also made a submission suggesting that avoidance of drainage and wetland rewetting be added as new activities under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This would allow developed countries to collect carbon credits by funding mitigation actions in developing country peatland areas.

5. Wetlands International in Doha

Information on all this and more will be available at the Wetlands International booth in the exhibition centre. Further information can be obtained via our blog page and twitter.