

Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel

The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel, administered by UNEP, advises the Global Environment Facility
(Version 5)

STAP Scientific and Technical screening of the Project Identification Form (PIF)

Date of screening: May 08, 2015

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Consultant(s):

I. PIF Information *(Copied from the PIF)*

FULL SIZE PROJECT GEF TRUST FUND

GEF PROJECT ID: 7993

PROJECT DURATION : 5

COUNTRIES : Belarus

PROJECT TITLE: Conservation-oriented Management of Forests and Wetlands to Achieve Multiple Benefits

GEF AGENCIES: UNDP

OTHER EXECUTING PARTNERS: Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Ministry of Forestry

GEF FOCAL AREA: Multi Focal Area

II. STAP Advisory Response *(see table below for explanation)*

Based on this PIF screening, STAP's advisory response to the GEF Secretariat and GEF Agency(ies):
Minor issues to be considered during project design

III. Further guidance from STAP

1. The objective of this project Conservation-oriented management of forests and wetlands to achieve multiple benefits in Belarus is "To introduce conservation-centered and financially self-sustainable approach to management of forests and wetlands bearing internationally important biodiversity and important for climate and land integrity".

2. Component 1 of the project aims to improve management and financial sustainability of 280,500 ha of protected areas through business planning and partnerships with private sector, work with local communities to conserve 50,000 ha of key connective habitat for European Bison, pilot wetland rehabilitation (2,000ha) through harvesting invasive woody species for biomass, and protect key Ramsar sites through community engagement in cranberry picking, tourism and livestock management. Component 2 aims to improve biodiversity management on 150,000 ha of managed forests through biodiversity mapping and awareness, and on 250,000 ha of peat through improved stock-taking (?) and information. Component 3 will target 1,500ha of critical habitat for Aquatic Warbler, Greater Spotted Eagle, Great Snipe and other species by controlling invasive woody species and managing water tables, improve genetic diversity of a micro-population of European Bison, artificially enhance Aquatic Warbler populations on restored wetland sites, provide artificial nests for Greater Spotted Eagles, and update research and monitoring of status and needs of IUCN threatened species in Belarus.

3. The case for conserving globally important biodiversity is strong. The section on drivers of degradation is useful, but would be strengthened through the use of maps and if it was made more concise with additional editing and organization. The baseline scenario shows reasonable commitment to these issues in Belarus. This is further validated by the coordination of this project with, for example, the World Bank Forest Sector GEF-6 project through the Ministry of Environment. The narrative for the proposed alternative scenario is written and organized in a way that is hard to read, and does not always appear to match the much stronger project description. This may well simply be a question of editing and text organization. The incremental cost reasoning table is strong, although it is not always easy to reconcile the numbers provided. Under climate change, for instance, there is "avoided deforestation on 11,000ha resulted from redesigned management plans for globally important forests at 150,000 ha". What does this mean, exactly? Peatland forest restoration of 10,000 ha and peat restoration of 2,000 ha is difficult to reconcile with the figures in the Project Summary table. These figures seem to be repeated in different parts of this table, and are difficult to follow. It is therefore particularly important that these outcomes are carefully summarized (as indicators) in the Project summary table.

4. As it currently stands, the project is largely a combination of valuable but individual actions to address a range of important biodiversity issues in Belarus. The process of implementing these changes is not really described, but could well be the most important contribution of the project if well designed. There may well be an intention to use these pilots to shift national norms and policies about biodiversity management in forests and peatlands, but the project would be stronger if it made this explicit, and also spent more time thinking through the process of how to implement these pilots in ways that established national norms, standards and even policy. A good example to learn from is the UNDP/GEF Grasslands Project in South Africa. In a somewhat similar manner to this project, it used high level facilitators to work with stakeholders to solve field-level problems, but importantly it ensured that these field practices were codified as guidelines by the stakeholders. Because of the widespread engagement of stakeholders in issues like urban protected areas, mine rehabilitation and offsets, and biodiversity management in forests, these guidelines were often adopted as national standards and norms. Perhaps Component 4 should be added and include 3.5 (monitoring and research) but also the codification of best practice?

5. The project makes an effort to reconcile delivery of multiple global environmental benefits in biodiversity, land degradation and climate change. The choice of peatland ecosystems is a strong case for this type of interventions. The project assumes that "release of carbon [will be] prevented and sequestration capacities restored of soil and vegetation at 250,000 ha of degraded peatland soils". Carbon cycle dynamics of peatland ecosystems is complicated. Peatlands store carbon in different parts of their ecosystem (biomass, litter, peat layer, mineral subsoil layer), each having their own GHGs (carbon dioxide, methane, and often nitrous oxide) dynamics, both spatial and temporal (e.g., Parish, F., Sirin, A., Charman, D., Joosten, H., Minayeva, T., Silvius, M. and Stringer, L. (Eds.) 2008. Assessment on Peatlands, Biodiversity and Climate Change: Main Report. Global Environment Centre, Kuala Lumpur and Wetlands International, Wageningen.). There are multiple best management practices (BMPs) to restore degraded peatlands that would have measurable GHG benefits (reviewed recently by FAO (2014): <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4029e.pdf>). Most of these practices aim to sustain/increase waterlogging and restrict aerobic decay of carbon in peatland soils. This project proposes a range of practices within and outside of PAs (regulated cranberry picking, sustainable grazing, sustainable wetland biomass collection, reconstruction of drainage infrastructure and etc.) that could have opposite impacts on GHG emissions. STAP recommends that project proponents carefully review existing literature on the potential impacts of different management techniques for peatland and wetlands restoration on GHG emissions. In some instances, preserving biodiversity and local livelihoods could run counter to GHG reduction benefits and will be locally specific. Final choice of management options should be informed by the assessment of all potential benefits (biodiversity, sustainable land management and GHG benefits). GHG benefits, particularly, should be assessed for project model areas based on the existing information if not additional measurements. In assessing GHG impact of project activities, STAP recommends using new GHG accounting for GEF project framework that will be submitted as Information Document for GEF's 48th Council meeting.

6. It is surprising that the PIF does not mention any lessons learned from several completed projects on peatlands in Belarus and elsewhere including projects funded by the GEF (IDs: 2057, 2104, 2751, particularly 4468 focused on carbon stocks monitoring, 5764, and 6947 as well as SGP). Of particular relevance are experiences of the completed German government funded project summarized in: Carbon credits from peatland rewetting Climate -biodiversity - land use. Science, policy, implementation and recommendations of a pilot project in Belarus Ed.: Franziska Tanneberger; Wendelin Wichtmann, 2011. 223 pp. Assuming that this project could generate significant MRV carbon benefits potentially eligible for voluntary carbon markets, it is surprising that PIF does not mention this possibility.

7. Therefore, several primary recommendations stem from this review:

- Ensure consistency (especially numbers of ha conserved) between the narrative and key tables.
- Consider using the field pilots as a means of working with a range of stakeholders to create national guidelines, norms and standards.
- Analyze and capitalize on lessons learned from earlier activities.
- Assess multiple environmental benefits including GHG emissions of different proposed management strategies and select and prioritize them accordingly.

<i>STAP advisory response</i>	<i>Brief explanation of advisory response and action proposed</i>
1. Concur	In cases where STAP is satisfied with the scientific and technical quality of the proposal, a simple "Concur" response will be provided; the STAP may flag specific issues that should be pursued rigorously as the proposal is developed into a full project document. At any time during the development of the project, the proponent is invited to approach STAP to consult on the design prior

	to submission for CEO endorsement.
2. Minor issues to be considered during project design	<p>STAP has identified specific scientific /technical suggestions or opportunities that should be discussed with the project proponent as early as possible during development of the project brief. The proponent may wish to:</p> <p>(i) Open a dialogue with STAP regarding the technical and/or scientific issues raised. (ii) Set a review point at an early stage during project development, and possibly agreeing to terms of reference for an independent expert to be appointed to conduct this review.</p> <p>The proponent should provide a report of the action agreed and taken, at the time of submission of the full project brief for CEO endorsement.</p>
3. Major issues to be considered during project design	<p>STAP proposes significant improvements or has concerns on the grounds of specified major scientific/technical methodological issues, barriers, or omissions in the project concept. If STAP provides this advisory response, a full explanation would also be provided. The proponent is strongly encouraged to:</p> <p>(i) Open a dialogue with STAP regarding the technical and/or scientific issues raised; (ii) Set a review point at an early stage during project development including an independent expert as required.</p> <p>The GEF Secretariat may, based on this screening outcome, delay the proposal and refer the proposal back to the proponents with STAP’s concerns.</p> <p>The proponent should provide a report of the action agreed and taken, at the time of submission of the full project brief for CEO endorsement.</p>