

Taxonomic proposals on the web: New ICTV consultative procedures

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Received December 1, 2002; accepted January 10, 2003
Published online March 3, 2003 © Springer-Verlag 2003

The procedures by which virus taxonomy is modified to accommodate new data and new ideas has evolved over the decades since the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) was established. The current procedure is specified in the Statutes [1]. In practice this has meant that proposals to change virus taxonomy and nomenclature are presented to the ICTV Executive Committee (EC), usually, but not exclusively, by the appropriate Subcommittee Chair. The proposals are then discussed by the EC and, either immediately or after further consultation with the proposers, proposals (including modifications in some cases) that are acceptable are recommended to the full ICTV membership, who vote on their formal acceptance.

The EC has recently experimented with use of the ICTVnet (a network that links all those involved in ICTV work) to allow more extensive consideration of proposals by EC members prior to an EC meeting. Based on this experience, the EC decided to extend this procedure to allow a wider consultation with the virology community than was possible previously. This note describes the new EC procedure for considering taxonomic proposals.

The new procedure

Figure 1 shows this procedure in a diagrammatic form. Taxonomic proposals are now considered by the EC at two meetings. EC Meeting 1 is preceded by a Pre-proposal Stage, when the proposal is put on ICTVnet (www.danforthcenter.org/ILTAB/ICTVnet) for ICTV members to comment. The proposal is discussed at an EC meeting and the EC decides if the proposal can go forward unmodified or if it recommends changes. The proposers next receive a response from the EC and are given time to modify the proposal, if they wish to do so. The proposal then moves to a Public Scrutiny Stage in which it is posted on the ICTVnet on a special ICTV Taxonomic Proposal Page that will be open to the public at large.

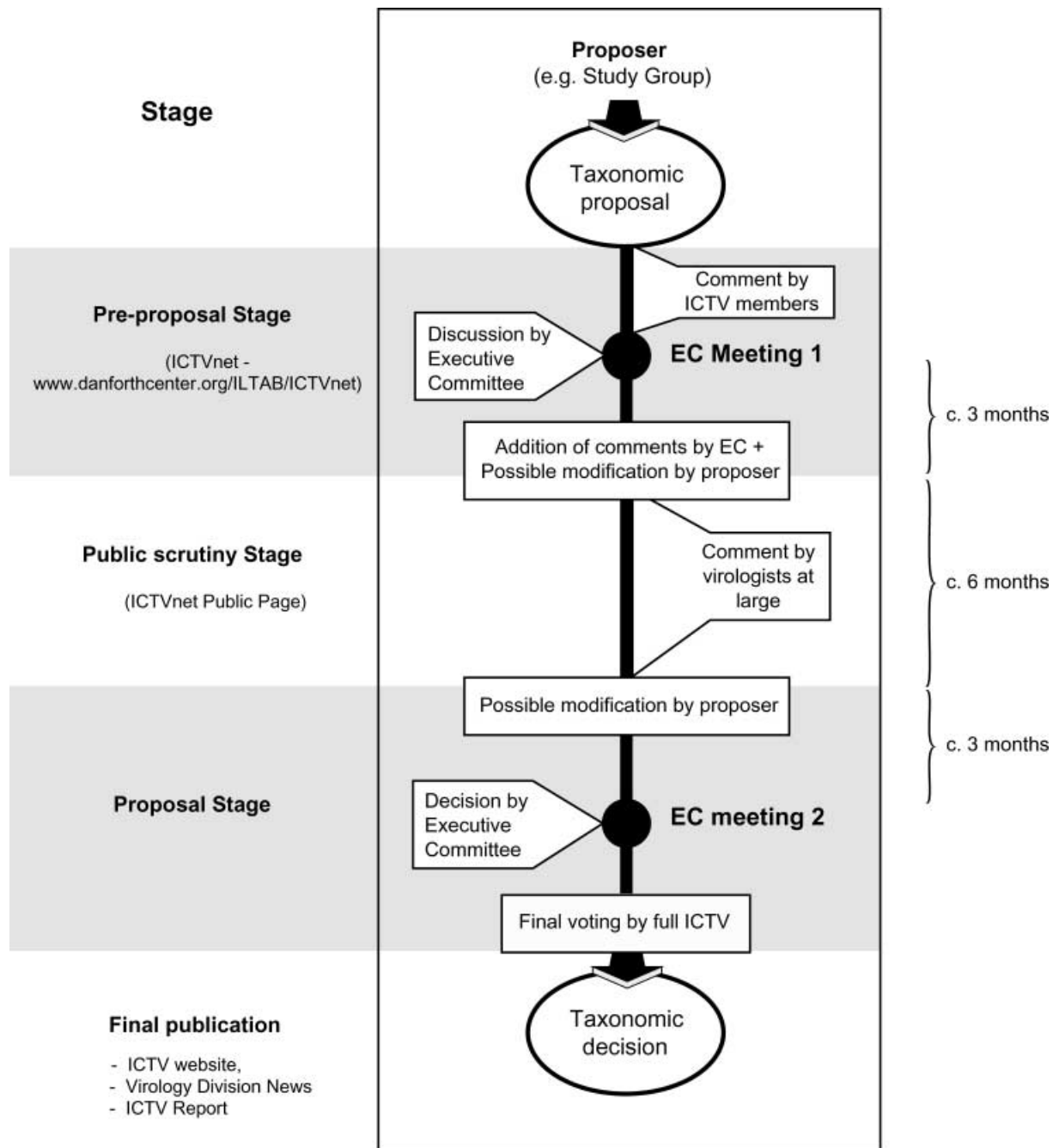


Fig. 1. Diagram showing the stages between making a taxonomic proposal and a taxonomic decision, the participants in the process and the approximate durations of the stages

After an interval, usually of 6 months, the proposers have a second opportunity to modify the proposal. It is then, modified or not, put on the agenda of the following EC meeting as a formal taxonomic proposal along with all the comments received. In this Proposal Stage, the taxonomic changes proposed are discussed, together with whatever comments have been

submitted via the ICTVnet, and an EC vote is taken. After a favourable EC decision, the process continues as before and the full ICTV votes on the recommendation it receives from the EC. Approved proposals are then taxonomic decisions. If the EC cannot accept the proposal, it is returned to the proposers along with explanatory comment and the Public Scrutiny stage is repeated.

A coding scheme for proposals has been devised so as to assist EC members in following the progress of proposals. A code number is assigned to proposals when they are first received. The number consists of four parts, the year of receipt, the Subcommittee originating the proposal, a unique number and a marker to define the stage of the proposal. In the pre-proposal stage the code is /01, in the public scrutiny phase and until the EC accept the proposal the code is /02 and in the proposal stage when the proposal has been accepted by the EC and is to be considered by the full ICTV membership, the code is /03. An example code of a recent proposal from the vertebrate virus subcommittee is 2002/V/45/02.

In summary, the new procedures mean that the EC will examine all proposals twice, with time between these examinations for revisions to be proposed and comments to be received from any virologist. A consequence of the longer consultative process is that it will normally take about 18 months from proposals being made until the final ratification of taxonomic decisions.

Acknowledgements

MAM is supported by the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department, and CMF is supported by the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A.

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