



PRESS RELEASE

Group on Earth Observations meets in Washington to strengthen access to data and information on biodiversity, forest carbon and other global issues

Co-chairs from China, European Commission, South Africa, United States

Washington DC, 17 November 2009 – The Group on Earth Observations (GEO) is holding its annual Plenary meeting in Washington on 17-18 November to assess and promote progress towards making information about global environmental change readily available to policy-makers, managers and anyone else who needs it.

“GEO is on track to make critical information about global changes widely and easily available. By making petabytes of data accessible on-line, we will dramatically improve decision-making for the benefit of society,” said José Achache, Director of the GEO Secretariat.

Some 80 nations, the European Commission and 56 international organizations are coordinating their Earth observation assets and strategies through GEO. They are sharing and interlinking their systems for tracking global trends in carbon levels, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, water resources, ocean temperatures and other critical indicators of planetary health and human well-being.

GEO is co-chaired by China, the European Commission (EC), South Africa and the United States. They are represented by Dr. Zheng Guoguang, Administrator of the China Meteorological Administration; Ms Manuela Soares, Environment Director in the EC’s Research Directorate General; Dr. Phil Mjwara, Director General of the Department of Science and Technology, South Africa; and Ms Sherburne Abbott, Associate Director for Environment, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Ms Abbott will chair the Washington meeting.

The Washington meeting will review emerging monitoring and information systems, web portals and data-sharing principles. An exhibition featuring over 30 booths will demonstrate the progress being achieved in these areas.

“To understand the complexities of environmental change and adapt efficiently to the consequences of global warming, we need to combine diverse observations and models of the world’s oceans and rivers, forests, biodiversity, and urban development,” said Achache.

Many of the information systems and services under review at the Plenary analyze Earth observation data gathered by satellites and by in-situ instruments, such as ocean buoys, carbon flux towers, rain and discharge gauges, cameras and sonar. Two of the examples being presented at the Plenary and exhibition are:

- **Forest Carbon Tracking** – By integrating field observations with radar and optical images provided by space agencies (including NASA, USGS, JAXA, CSA, ESA, DLR, ASI, INPE, GISTDA and CRESDA), the GEO Forest Carbon Tracking task is estimating trends in the spatial extent and carbon content of the world’s forests. Participants in the task can share images, photos, in-situ data, models as well as results via an on-line platform contributed by Google Earth Outreach (visit portal.geo-ftc.org after 10h30 a.m.).

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- The GEO Biodiversity Observation Network – Some 100 organizations are collaborating through GEO BON to bring together their biodiversity data, information and forecasts and make them more readily accessible to policymakers, managers, experts and other users.

The “GEO Portal” for searching integrated data sets and presenting targeted information products to decision makers will also feature in Washington. Two leading information technology companies, ESRI and CompuSult, and two international agencies, the European Space Agency and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, are contributing to this effort.

The progress made so far by GEO includes the rapid expansion of the free and open access to data and observations. Inspired by the data-sharing principles developed by GEO, space agencies are making their data much more easily accessible – free of charge.

The first to adopt a policy of distributing free satellite imagery were Brazil and China. Since, then, Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research (INPE) has distributed over one million images. More than 70% of these have come from the China-Brazil CBERS satellites.

The Landsat archive – the world’s most extensive collection of continuously-acquired remotely sensed satellite imagery – has been made available free-of-charge and without restriction by the US Geological Survey since late 2008. From just a few thousand downloads a year before the adoption of the new policy, the number of downloaded images reached the one million mark in August.

Another major provider of satellite observations, Europe’s Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) program, has announced its intention to allow open access to data streams from the Sentinel satellites that will be launched over the next several years.

GEO is building the Global Earth Observation System of Systems, or GEOSS, in order to address nine priorities of critical importance to addressing global challenges and ensuring sustainable economic development. They are agriculture, biodiversity, climate, disasters, ecosystems, energy, health, water and weather.

GEO was established in 2005 after the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the Group of Eight leading industrialized countries (G8) and three ministerial Earth Observation Summits all called for improving existing observation systems.

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