

U.S. Officials Say Plans Continue for Earth Observation System

International working group to meet in Baveno, Italy



Secretary of State Colin Powell, left, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, center, and Commerce Secretary Donald Evans at the first Earth Observation Summit, in Washington, DC, July 31. (©AP/WWP)

By Jim Fuller
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- U.S. officials say plans are moving forward to create a system that links thousands of satellites, aircraft and Earth-based monitoring stations around the globe to provide more accurate predictions of climate change, crop production, disease outbreaks and natural hazards.

U.S. Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere Conrad Lautenbacher told reporters November 17 that an intergovernmental working group -- the Group on Earth Observations (GEO) -- will hold its second meeting November 28-29 in Baveno, Italy to continue work on a 10-year implementation plan for an Earth observation system. The initial meeting of the group took place immediately after the first Earth Observation Summit held July 31, 2003 in Washington, D.C.

Lautenbacher said the working group has set an ambitious schedule, with a draft framework for the 10-year plan to be presented at a ministerial in Tokyo, Japan next April, and the full plan to be presented at a ministerial meeting in late 2004.

Ministers and delegates from more than 30 countries attending the first Earth Observation Summit in July adopted a declaration calling for the development of a comprehensive, coordinated Earth observing system. This system would seek to connect and expand the existing array of observation platforms around the globe -- including land-based, airborne and space-borne systems -- for a wide range of uses in climate, weather, natural hazards and living resources.

Ministers attending the 2003 G-8 Summit in Evian, France called for strengthening international cooperation on Earth observations. International calls for greater integration of Earth observation systems also were made at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

Lautenbacher said the Earth observation system would be designed to support policy decisions across a wide spectrum of international issues, including social, medical, health and environmental issues.

"There will be a great deal of information to be gained from a consolidation of Earth observing satellites," he said. "The age of satellite observations is upon us, and we will be able to, within the next several generations, obtain much more than just weather pictures of the Earth."

Determining how to coordinate and integrate the data and information from space platforms with that collected from land-based and ocean platforms will be a major challenge for the international community, Lautenbacher said, and is one of the problems the intergovernmental group meeting in Baveno will be working on.

Lautenbacher said that existing observing systems already demonstrate their value in estimating crop yields, monitoring water and air quality, improving airline safety and forecasting weather events such as El Nino. Despite those successes, gaps in understanding Earth and its complex systems severely limit knowledge of how to address concerns, such as drought, disease outbreaks, agricultural production, and

transportation challenges. Lautenbacher said new observation capabilities are also required to address scientific uncertainties such as precipitation, soil moisture and ocean salinity.

"For example, if you look at the systems that we have in place today, from a global perspective, you will find significant holes in ocean observing," he said.

Lautenbacher said scientists get fairly good coverage of the ocean surface from satellites, but they do not have comprehensive coverage of the deep or even mid-ocean. Scientists point out that the world's oceans cover 70 percent of the planet and drive climate trends that affect every nation of the globe, yet they are sparsely monitored and poorly understood.

"We're just in the infancy of observing the ocean to provide the kinds of data that you need for comprehensive climate and weather monitoring," he said. "If you gained comprehensive monitoring, you'd be able to look at the impacts of the oceans on human health, on our coastal zones, and on fisheries production -- not only along the coasts but in the open ocean by monitoring migratory species."

Further emphasizing the need for better data, Paul Gilman, science advisor and assistant administrator for research and development at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), said a major environmental study recently published by the agency revealed that half of the indicators used to assess the health of the environment -- indicators to assess the quality of the water, air and land -- were inadequate.

"The most striking finding was noting that we're now in our 31st year under the Clean Water Act, and in doing our report we had to conclude that the use of major water quality indicators were not adequate for us to draw a national picture on water quality," he said. "So it's in this context that EPA is engaged in this effort to develop an Earth observation system."

Gilman said such a system could help in many circumstances that occur without warning. He said one of the most recent examples would be the wildfires that spread over portions of the western state of California last month.

"Our agency was worried about the consequences of such things as air pollution from the fires," the environment official said. "But we really couldn't get a good handle on the amount of pollution. I would envision a time when both remote sensing and imaging for monitoring a situation like that will be orders of magnitude improved over what they are today."

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