

# New system to share weather, health data with developing countries

The Associated Press  
Published: November 27, 2006

BERLIN: A new satellite-based information system will quickly spread environmental and health data across the world so that developing countries can anticipate catastrophes such as drought, storms and floods — for only about US\$1,500 (€1,144) in setup costs.

The GEONETCast system — to be unveiled Tuesday at an international conference in Bonn, Germany — will permit governments in poorer nations to tap information from the sophisticated satellites and weather stations run largely by the world's richer industrial countries, organizers say.

For example, officials trying to contain wildfires could use near real-time data on wind speed, wind direction and surface temperature to ease the impact of the disaster. Data on soil moisture, rain and vegetation cover could help forecast drought, enabling farmers and governments to take steps ahead of time.

The information system makes the information available at low cost by using satellite transmission that can be pulled down and read using a satellite dish and readily available software, keeping startup costs minimal. It is expected to begin operating next year, officials say.

The reliance on satellite links means it can reach areas without good Internet access, although a Web portal is expected to be part of the system for use in countries where Internet capacity is readily available.

"This will be the first time, we've been able to blanket the earth, essentially, with basic environmental information that all nations can use," said Conrad C. Lautenbacher, a retired U.S. Navy vice admiral who heads the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"So it's an exciting prospect to take information developed from a number of sources, much of it in the developed countries, and apply it ... around the world," Lautenbacher told The Associated Press.

The system "brings together databases that heretofore have been separate and not easily attainable by many around the world."

The system is to be demonstrated Tuesday at a conference of the Group on Earth Observations, comprising 66 countries, the European Union and 43 international organizations. The group's GEONETCast project is being

organized by the United States, China, the World Meteorological Organization and EUMETSAT, which operates European weather satellites.

"Policy decisions and quick decision-making in developing countries requires data, and most of the developing countries do not have the infrastructure," said Philemon Mjwara, director-general of South Africa's Department of Science and Technology.

GEONETCast "provides us with the infrastructure, and we are very grateful to the developed world for making this infrastructure available, for us to have access to this data which is crucial for policy making," Mjwara said.

South Africa already uses satellite data on vegetation cover to help maize and wheat farmers plan crop selection or take preventive steps ahead of dry or wet weather, he said.