



U.S. Department of the Interior

**Remarks Prepared for Delivery by
the Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
Secretary, United States Department of the Interior
Group on Earth Observations Summit
Cape Town, South Africa
November 30, 2007**

Minister Mangena...

Co-chair ministers...

Fellow ministers...

I need only say one word to convey images of destruction. Tsunami, earthquake, drought, flood, or hurricane.

Can we help our people survive these tragic events? The answer is yes, and that is why we are here.

On behalf of the United States of America, I thank the people of South Africa for hosting this global earth observation summit. It is certainly worth noting that five years ago, South Africa hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Today's summit is just one example of the important fruit borne at that event back in 2002.

The representation here of 73 members demonstrates how vitally important the work we are doing – together, as partners -- is to the future of the people of every nation on Earth and to the health of the Earth itself.

I have heard the nations represented here each voice strong support for the vision of the Group on Earth Observation. The United States offers its unwavering support as well.

World leaders must make decisions to benefit humankind. They will make better decisions if they have access to coordinated, comprehensive and sustained earth observation.

The United States is committed to this. Today I bring you greetings from President George W. Bush.

[Greeting from the President:]

I send greetings to those gathered for the 2007 Group on Earth Observations Ministerial Summit in Cape Town, South Africa.

The world's response to the environmental challenges of our time will help shape the global economy and the condition of our planet for future generations. Through the Global Earth Observation System of Systems, which my Administration helped launch 4 years ago, we are expanding our knowledge and understanding of changes in the environment so we can better protect the world's natural resources and the well-being of our citizens. This meeting is an opportunity to highlight the importance of the GEOSS and discuss the critical environmental, economic, and societal concerns of countries around the globe. By working together and linking observation systems worldwide, we can address a broad range of issues and help build a more hopeful future for people everywhere.

I appreciate all those involved with the GEOSS for your hard work and dedication to providing the best science and data to make informed decisions. Your efforts help safeguard human life and advance our understanding of the world around us.

Laura and I send our best wishes for a successful event.

As Secretary of the Interior of the United States, I join you today both as a producer of Earth imaging and as a user.

The government agencies for which I am responsible include the US Geological Survey, one of the American agencies that produces satellite data, seismic data, water monitoring and other on-the-ground data about our Earth.

My Department is responsible for managing 20 percent of all the land in the United States.

So I am also a user of Earth observation and a believer in its value.

In October, I briefed President Bush on massive wildfires in the state of California that displaced close to a million Americans and destroyed thousands of homes. Satellite images helped me explain how the fires were encircling our cities and how we could best fight them.

Earth observations have given me insights into the drought that affects my country. Before coming to this summit, I met with governors of several of our states to discuss how to deal with the drought in their region. In doing so I reviewed water monitoring data and maps showing the extent of the drought. Earlier this year, I visited Australia, where they are experiencing one of the worst droughts in their history. They also depend on Earth observation information to determine how to address this growing problem.

Satellite imaging shows us the impacts of climate change on the polar regions that some of our nations share. I've been to Native villages on the west coast of Alaska that are seeing those impacts. Melting sea ice. Thawing permafrost. Coastal erosion. Some of the oceanfront streets of the villages are falling into the sea. The people in those villages wonder if the changes they are witnessing are going to impact their way of life.

There are many challenges facing us that require us to use knowledge that can only be gained by intensive Earth observations.

I know that all of you in this room have been forced to deal with similar challenges in your own countries.

The global partnership we call GEO is a mechanism for each of us to provide what is needed by the others. Every nation has a role to play. Every nation has something to gain.

It takes all of us working together in an atmosphere of cooperation and open exchange of information to offer the people of our world hope. Hope that we can shape a future in which the world's leaders have the understanding and the will to address the problems of climate change, of natural disasters and the press of humankind on a decreasing pool of natural resources.

We have already seen many benefits from this global cooperation.

In the wake of the great Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004, the nations of the world came together not only to aid the survivors and refugees, but to put in place an early warning system. Now the nations of that region are better prepared to warn their people when a tsunami approaches.

The same international approach is being brought to bear among the United States, Mexico, and Canada, which have developed a drought monitoring program to exchange data and scientific expertise.

In addition to the China-Brazil collaboration I heard about today, another example of outstanding international collaboration is that of Japan and the United States in the creation of a new ASTER Elevation Product, and we commend Japan for its offer to share this important product with the world.

And under US GEO leadership, this year the United States committed itself to continuing to provide Landsat-type imagery of the globe for the benefit of the US and the world.

By working together, we have accomplished a great deal in just a few short years. However, now is the time to move to the next level.

If we are to make real advances in each of the social benefit areas of GEO we must share data, information and knowledge across national, cultural and language barriers.

We must achieve global data compatibility.

We must embrace the idea of science without borders.

If we can achieve these goals, I foresee a day when we have in place an expanded drought and famine early-warning system that would enable us to get needed supplies to affected regions before people start dying for lack of clean water and food.

I look forward to breakthroughs in Earth imaging that will lead us to better agricultural practices so we can feed hungry people.

I can see us giving the world's nations hope of dealing with the complexities of their energy needs in the future.

And we should set goals aimed at providing clean air and clean water for all the world's people.

I'm sure we all remember the "Big Blue Marble" – the famous photograph of Earth taken from space in 1972 by the crew of Apollo 17.

What a wonderful image. Our beautiful blue and green planet floating alone in space. The only home our species has ever known. The place where all of human history and, so far as we know, the history of life itself has taken place.

When that photo was taken, our Earth was a life support system for about four billion people.

Today, within just one generation, that same Earth supports almost seven billion. By 2050, that number is expected to grow to about nine billion.

Those billions will be our heirs. Our children.

What kind of world will we leave to our children? It won't be a perfect world. We know that. It will be a changing world. A challenging world.

So we need also to leave them an understanding of how it is changing. What causes those changes. How they can mitigate the changes. How they can predict the changes and prepare for them.

We need to pass on to them the tools they will need to observe, monitor and care for this wonderful blue and green planet of ours.

We need to give them hope. Hope for their own future -- for their own children – and the tools to prepare for and manage their future.

They have a right to expect that from us, I believe. They have a right to expect us to have been good stewards of the Earth.

In my job as Secretary of the Interior for the United States, I am very concerned about the concept of stewardship. Stewardship of our wonderful national parks, wildlife refuges and other public lands and natural resources.

To me that word, "stewardship," means more than just taking good care of something. It means taking care of something very valuable. Something that belongs to someone else.

We of this generation are charged with taking care of our world and all its treasures for the generations that will follow.

We don't really inherit the Earth from our parents -- we borrow it from our children.

Some day we will hand it to them. When that day comes, I hope we'll be able to say we've been good stewards of the Earth.

As we near the end of this first decade of the 21st Century, we face many global challenges.

Climate change. Drought. Natural disasters. Deforestation. Salinization.

The loss and malicious destruction of our natural resources.

Health impacts tied to the quality of our air and our water.

We as world leaders must have a better understanding of the science of the natural world if we are to develop policies that ensure sustainable development and prosperity for our people.

The problems that confront us cannot be solved by an individual. They cannot be solved by the developed nations alone. We are all at risk. We are all called upon to act. We are called upon to act together.

Every nation on our planet has one of the puzzle pieces that make up the full picture of our planet. If those pieces are put together, they allow us to view and understand our world in a new way.

World leaders must have that kind of comprehensive understanding – the whole picture-- if we are going to develop policies that ensure sustainable development and prosperity for our people and hope for our children.

Let's commit here today that we will faithfully fulfill our duty as stewards of the earth. That we will never fail in our duty to hand over to our children this world, this valuable thing that will soon be entrusted to their care.

The United States reaffirms its commitment to the Group on Earth Observations. We are committed to the advancement of Earth observation to address global economic, environmental and social issues.

We are committed to working with you to respond to the challenges of climate change, population growth and loss of biodiversity. To move our nations toward sustainable use of our natural resources.

We are committed to fostering the development of an international standard for public warnings so that we Earth observers all speak in a language understood by emergency responders anywhere on Earth.

The United States strongly supports the Cape Town Declaration. We pledge to work with all nations to gather and openly distribute vital data about our planet. And we encourage all the world's nations to adopt policies that allow full and open exchange of scientific data – providing science without borders.

I am proud to be here with you today and represent the United States of America as we – together, as partners -- take these crucial steps – steps that lead us toward a true global stewardship of our Earth.

Stewardship with integrity and excellence.

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Last Updated on 11/30/07