

## 100 Nations Move Toward Coordinated Climate Data

Satellites, ground stations, radar systems and ocean monitors would focus on global warming.

By Clare Nullis

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CAPE TOWN, South Africa - In a display of harmony far removed from the bitter politics surrounding global warming, experts from 100 countries are making progress toward a coordinated system to monitor climate change and hopefully limit its impact.

The Group on Earth Observations aims to link up the myriad satellites, ground stations, radar systems and ocean monitors that often operate in isolation. Working together, the monitoring systems could boost the capacity to predict - and protect against - droughts, floods, hurricanes and disease.

"The goal is to provide the right information in the right format at the right time to the right people so they can make the right decisions," U.S. Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne said yesterday during the group's annual conference in Cape Town.

China and Brazil promised to distribute their Earth-observation satellite data free to Africa, while the European Union has also launched a project to help Africa close its Earth-observation gaps.

Enormous strides in the sharing of technology and pooling of ideas have been made in the last few years. There are tsunami-alert systems to prevent a repeat of the 2004 Southeast Asian catastrophe that killed 230,000.

But the challenges associated with global warming, overpopulation, deforestation and desertification are growing.

There are glaring gaps in poor, heavily populated countries, and too little overall coordination. The warnings for a recent Bangladesh cyclone came from a Bangladesh-born hurricane expert in the United States who made his own calculations about the storm's impact and sent word home.

A Global Earth Observation System was devised in 2005 for completion in 2015 with the aim of allowing access to a vast quantity of information on changes in the Earth's land, oceans, atmosphere and biosphere through a single Web portal.

The system envisages common technical standards to ensure that data emanating from one country can be received and understood in another. One of the items up for discussion yesterday was a common alert protocol that would include a single radio frequency for disasters.

If authorities were able to predict drought three to six months ahead, this would enable them to make decisions on planting crops and water- resource allocation way ahead of time. In the United States, this could help save billions of dollars, and in Africa, it would save untold lives, said Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr., head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Tracking and combating the spread of infectious diseases like malaria and cholera could be improved if early-warning systems were developed for infected areas.

Similarly, early warnings of likely epidemics in Africa's "meningitis belt" would allow health experts to integrate user-friendly climate forecasts into vaccination and treatment programs.

Kempthorne said information and expertise gleaned from the North American Drought Monitor program developed by Canada, Mexico and the United States would be made available to other continents.

"Each of the nations represented here holds pieces to a puzzle which, when the different pieces are assembled, we get a total view of Earth," Kempthorne said.

He said the sense of cooperation at the conference was overwhelming, far removed from the bitter politics surrounding global warming. The United States has been seen as slow to even acknowledge man was causing global warming, and has balked at the 1997 Kyoto accord requiring 36 industrial nations to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2012.

Discussions for the next round of action on climate change begin next week in Bali, Indonesia.