

NR 04/09

NEWS RELEASE

Land Degradation Central to a Looming Storm, Scientists Warn

Buenos Aires, 24 September 2009. Scientists have issued a warning of a looming “storm” that is gathering as the financial meltdown, energy and food crises, population growth, drought and other effects of climate change, and land crises converge in many developing countries. To forestall this possibility and increase food production by 1.8 per cent every year in order to meet the food requirements for the growing global population, the international community must arrest land degradation that is progressing at a rate of 1 per cent every year, the experts say.

The warning came at the conclusion of a three-day international conference that concluded today in Buenos Aires, Argentina, attended by over 200 scientists from all over the world, and organized by five international research institutes collaborating under the Drylands Science for Development (DSD) Consortium, working in collaboration with the Secretariat of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the UNCCD Committee of Science and Technology (CST).

Mahmoud Solh, Chair of the DSD Consortium and Director-General of the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), said 41 per cent of the earth is vulnerable to land degradation, and drylands are expected to increase by an additional 11 per cent by 2080 in developing countries.

William Dar, Director-General of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), and who chaired the UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference, lamented that land degradation is growing at a time when the population is set to increase by 2 to 3 billion people.

He said “sustainable land management, rehabilitation of degraded areas and other investments to realize food security must be attended to in a systematic manner, but if business as usual sustainable continues to prevail, then we will have the perfect storm.”

Solh said a big part of the problem is a lack of available data for ministers of environment and agriculture to demonstrate to planning and finance ministers that there are serious economic costs to desertification, land degradation and drought, and of cost doing nothing can be devastating to national economies and rural populations.

He drew attention to the collapse of agriculture in the Aral Sea region due to salinization, and in Central Asia and in certain parts of West Asia and North Africa due to the depletion of underground water from shallow and deep aquifers. Pollution from obsolete pesticides is another cause for land degradation. Specific examples of cost, Solh said, include

the USD 25 million World Bank-financed an FAO project to eradicate pollutant pesticides from Africa.

Dar praised the Scientific Conference as a historic event for the Convention, which is “setting in place the steps that will enable outcomes from scientists to get to the decision-making bodies at the national level.” The scientists, he reported, proposed at least five recommendations to lay the ground for monitoring and assessing desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD).

First, the monitoring and assessment of DLDD should make use of knowledge-management approaches across different scales and levels, sectors and scientific disciplines. Second, knowledge-sharing science would enhance monitoring and assessment, and strengthen human capacities. Third, information is collected on the costs and benefits of DLDD.

Fourth, the Convention establishes an interdisciplinary scientific advisory mechanism to facilitate the coordination and dissemination of new knowledge, and with clear channels for its advice in decision-making. And fifth, that the UNCCD make use of a networking body so that results can be accessed, shared and used with greater ease.

Klaus Kellner, Chair of the Committee on Science and Technology of the ninth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, added that scientists, local communities and policy makers need “to come together and speak the same language” in order to effectively tackle the “adaptation and mitigation of land degradation and of climate change.”

The UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference is the outcome of a request made in September 2007 to scientists, by countries that are party to Convention, for guidance in monitoring and assessing the bio-physical and socio-economic aspects of desertification and land degradation in order to support decision-making in land and water management.

The recommendations from the 1st Scientific Conference will be considered by the Parties during their ninth Conference session taking place concurrently in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 21 September to 2 October 2009.

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About the UNCCD

Developed as a result of the Rio Summit, the UNCCD is a unique instrument that has brought attention to land degradation in some of the most vulnerable ecosystems and affected populations in the world. Thirteen years after coming into force, the UNCCD benefits from the largest membership of the three Rio Conventions and is recognized as an instrument that can make an important contribution to the achievement of sustainable development and generate global benefits.