



United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification

United Nations Launches from Colorado State University Decade-Long Effort to Address World's Drylands

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Fort Collins, USA/Bonn, Germany, 12 November 2010 -Yesterday at Colorado State University, the United Nations announced the North American launch of its Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification and highlighted the critical roles universities and the scientific community play in addressing climate change and other global aspects of land degradation.

CSU and U.N. officials also signed a letter of intent to explore how the two organizations can work closely together on desertification research.

The U.N.'s Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification runs from 2010-2020 to raise awareness and action to improve protection and management of the world's drylands, which are home to one-third of the world's population.

“Continued land degradation – whether from climate change, unsustainable agriculture or poor management of water resources – is a threat to food security, leading to starvation among the most acutely affected communities and robbing the world of productive land,” U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a statement that marked the start of the decade. He called on the global community to intensify efforts to “nurture the land we need for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and guaranteeing human well-being.”

Colorado State University Hosting North American Announcement

Colorado State University is the first university in the world to host one of the U.N.'s “decade” announcements. Ceará, Brazil, hosted the global launch of the decade in August 2010. The U.N. is completing the launch of the decade in regional locations. The African regional launch took place in Nairobi, Kenya; the Asian regional launch was in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The European regional launch is planned in London in December.

The regional launches mark the official start of the annual observance of the decade declared in 2007 by the U.N. General Assembly.

As part of the North American launch at CSU, Luc Gnacadja, executive secretary of the U.N. Convention to Combat Desertification, or UNCCD, and other university officials were joined by leading scientists from around the world in participating in a seminar series that focused on North American desertification topics. Distinguished guest speakers included Thomas





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Reinsch from the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Shannon Horst of the Savory Institute and Jurgen Hoth from the World Wildlife Fund in Mexico.

“We have been working with CSU scientists for almost two years now,” Gnacadja said. “The strength of the U.S. interdisciplinary approach is very important, and it is not universal. Evident in the universities is the linking of the biophysical systems through social sciences. And a real strength is in data systems. Capacity building as part of research is useful, and extension services in the United States may be a model that could work elsewhere. University communities are the nexus between research and policy.

“CSU is also well placed to identify and explore emerging issues and can help to shape an international research agenda that effectively and proactively supports sustainable land management, increased livelihoods and conservation in the drylands,” he said.

“Just as there is no single cause of desertification, there will be no single solution to this pervasive world issue,” said CSU President Tony Frank. “Combating desertification will require a vast collaborative effort, pulling research and discovery from a spectrum of disciplines to better understand its causes. Colorado State University is proud to host the regional launch of the U.N.’s Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification and to be joining the effort to overcome the challenges that create this global environmental challenge.”

Desertification: The Problem at Hand

Desertification is the process by which land degrades into drylands or deserts. Natural deserts make up an important part of the earth’s ecosystems, while desertification is what happens when once-healthy landscapes in dryland areas turn barren from human impacts and worsening drought. Sometimes, as in Colorado and other dustbowl regions of the world, sand spreads into these landscapes, turning them desert-like. But desertified land can be restored.

Desertification remains a concern across a large portion of the western United States, so much that 17 Western states, including Colorado, are classified as drylands. Land degradation has been a particular challenge on rangelands and lower elevation forests due to unsustainable land management practices including overgrazing, particularly in drought conditions.

The issue of desertification on agricultural lands east of the Rocky Mountains was first recognized as a national problem with the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, which generated awareness about poor land management and soil and vegetative cover loss. Colorado has experienced the effects of desertification, particularly in areas of drought and water resource management, but is also home to one of the most respected climate science communities in the world. Many prominent institutions in the state specialize in research of practical applied technologies in agriculture, water and renewable energy for use in arid and semi-arid regions of the world.





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“The state of Colorado has had to address the issues surrounding land degradation including soil erosion, water conservation and drought management,” said Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter. “As this environmental global debate continues, Colorado institutions, including CSU, will be leaders in collaborating with United Nations organizations to address sustainable land management issues.”

Quick Facts about North American Desertification Issues

Almost 80 percent of U.S. lands impacted by desertification are considered rangelands. Sustainable land use to prevent desertification is a critical issue.

Susceptibility to desertification is still a concern in croplands throughout the Great Plains, east of the Rocky Mountains, and lands that are west of the Rocky Mountains, which are primarily being used for rangeland, recreation and mining.

The drylands of Canada have periodically experienced severe droughts that greatly reduced agricultural productivity. Soil erosion over the last century has led to an increase in nutrient inputs and a conversion in land use from cropland to forage land.

Mexico’s desertification problems are largely caused by excessive clearing and cultivation of land unsuitable for agriculture, overgrazing, exploitation of forests and vegetation for fuel, application of inefficient irrigation practices, mining activities and urban sprawl.

Migration issues have arisen in North American related to dryland opportunities.

Decade’s History and Purpose

In 2007, the U.N. General Assembly declared 2010-2020 the Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification to heighten public awareness about the threat of desertification and land degradation as well as educate affected populations on ways to combat it by practicing sustainable land management to eradicate poverty, one of its key drivers.

The decade is spearheaded by United Nations agencies. They include the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and other relevant bodies of the United Nations including the Department of Public Information of the United Nations Secretariat. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification is the focal point of this inter-agency task force.

For more information about the Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification, visit <http://unddd.unccd.int/index.htm>.

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Note to Reporters: Broadcast-quality video and audio and print-quality photos will be available to download by 2 p.m. at www.news.colostate.edu with the news release. Fact sheets from the United Nations and CSU are currently available with the news release at www.news.colostate.edu.



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