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BOOST FOR NATIONAL EARTH OBSERVATION THROUGH SA/FLANDERS COLLABORATION

Llew Jones, Meraka Institute

Earth observation and remote sensing technologies skills will be strengthened nationally with the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) by South Africa and Flanders in March 2006. The CSIR and the Flemish VITO made a mutual commitment to cooperate across international boundaries in areas of common concern.

Signed by Llew Jones of the Meraka Institute, a national research centre managed by the CSIR, and Francis Vanderhaeghen of VITO, the Flemish Institute for Technological Research, in Cape Town , the MoU creates the framework by which the two organisations will combine their respective competencies and knowledge to benefit broad socio-economic growth in both regions. The signing was witnessed by South Africa 's Minister of Science and Technology, Mosibudi Mangena, and Fientje Moerman, the Flemish Minister of Science and Innovation.

The signing coincided with a workshop opened by Mangena, at which the results of past cooperation between South Africa and Flanders were discussed. The workshop is part of the celebration of the 10th anniversary of science and technology research collaboration between the two countries, which was attended by Crown Prince Philippe and Princess Mathilde of Belgium.

"In terms of the agreement, the CSIR and VITO will focus on skills development in earth observation and remote sensing, primarily in the SADC region, to contribute to South Africa 's human resource development objectives," confirms Jones. "Capacity building is planned through advanced training curricula."

While earth observation offers a valuable platform on which to grow the relationship, it is envisaged that the two organisations will cooperate in other technologies areas, such as climate change and ecology in the future.

"VITO and the CSIR are planning a number of projects jointly with other partners," explains Jones. "These include vegetation management applications such as drought monitoring, biomass estimation and invasive species detection and monitoring."

"Projects focusing on agro-environment applications will be undertaken in partnership with the Agricultural Research Council. Such projects include crop yield and area estimates, land degradation monitoring and evaluation, and precision agriculture," he says.

He points out that work on safety and security systems (for use in border control applications, for example) will be explored in partnership with groups such as the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Department of Defence.

Other projects planned include land and urban management applications through high spatial and spectral resolution techniques, and related opportunities such as mine rehabilitation, waste monitoring and marine applications.

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Jones highlights the broader national and international context in which this cooperation in earth observation and remote sensing technologies will take place, "This development builds on the success of the SA-Flemish bilateral relationship, which has been in place for 10 years."

"Both organisations and regions will enhance their ability to respond and contribute appropriately to global initiatives such as the vision of the Group on Earth Observations for the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), and the forthcoming European Union's Framework 7 Programme." Jones believes that national initiatives, such as the imminent South African Earth Observation Strategy and aerospace industry developments, will also benefit.

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