

Reflecting on GEO Week 2019



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Terri Freemantle reports from Canberra, Australia, where 1,500 scientists, policy-makers, and government ministers from across the world gathered in November for the 2019 GEO Week Summit

Held every four years, the Group on Earth Observations (GEO) Ministerial Summit brings together the international Earth Observation community. Its purpose: to outline government-level commitments to the GEO Work programme ... one that is undertaken by the Group to realise its Vision, Mission and Strategic Objectives.¹

Throughout the week, the focus was largely on how the Earth Observation community can provide support for three global priority engagement areas: The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction;

and the Paris Climate Agreement.

Several international organisations also chose to use GEO Week 2019 to announce country-led interventions linked to these priorities.

Pacific Partnership

The first intervention announced by the UK government was the third call for the UK Space Agency's International Partnerships Programme. This includes a specific call for UK-Australia collaboration in the Pacific ... a move that reflects both growing global interest in working with the Pacific Small Island

With more than 1500 delegates from 57 countries, the annual GEO Week, and quadrennial Ministerial Summit is one of the world's largest gatherings of EO specialists, practitioners and policy makers. Photo: Group on Earth Observation (GEO)

Developing States as well as the recently-announced UK-Australia Space Bridge.

During the summit, the Pacific region was a key focus of discussion, and the Pacific Island Programme brought together scientists and policy-makers to discuss regional challenges. This included improved global collaboration to mitigate climate change and measures for disaster risk reduction (DRR). To this end, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) made an intervention during the plenary to announce a new 'Data Needs in the Pacific' project. This is intended as a precursor to the proposed Digital Earth Pacific – a geographical expansion to the already successful Digital Earth Australia and subsequent Digital Earth Africa.

One of the most important ministerial-level outcomes from the whole week was the endorsement of the Canberra Declaration, which calls on countries with programmes for Overseas Development Assistance to consider increasing their support for Earth Observation, as a technology with the potential to support developing countries, much like the UK's International Partnership Programme.

The second UK Government Intervention was the announcement that the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) will make a significant financial contribution to the GEO Secretariat for projects that build capability in developing countries. This funding commitment will likely support ongoing involvement in the Geo Global Agricultural Monitoring (GEOGLAM) flagship programme² – a GEO led initiative that will "will strengthen global agricultural monitoring by improving the use of remote sensing tools for crop production projections and weather forecasting".³

Industry Commitments

Several major industry players used GEO



The Summit was hosted by the then Minister for Resources and Northern Australia Senator, The Hon. Matthew Canavan, who is pictured here meeting delegates. Photo: Group on Earth Observation (GEO)



Ministers, Ambassadors and Ministerial representatives to the 2019 Ministerial Summit of the intergovernmental Group on Earth Observations. Photo: Australian Government / Geoscience Australia

Week to announce funding commitments that will facilitate low cost Earth Observation research. These include a two-year GEO-Google Earth Engine Partnership worth US\$3million to provide free licenses to EO technology and data initiatives that make a significant impact in addressing the world's toughest challenges.⁴

Amazon's Sustainability Data Initiative at Amazon Web Services (AWS) announced in-kind support for Digital Earth Africa ... one that transfers the successes of Digital Earth Australia into an African context, and "will provide a routine, reliable and operational service, using Earth observations to deliver decision-ready products enabling policy makers, scientists, the private sector and civil society to address social, environmental and economic changes on the continent and develop an ecosystem for innovation across sectors"⁵.

Dedicated industry track

GEO Week featured a packed agenda of side events and, for the first time, a dedicated Industry Track. This enabled EO innovators from around the world to converge and liaise with their academic and policy counterparts, and for each community to share their stories on the increasingly important role of industry in the Earth Observation community.

One thing of note during these



Ingrid Southworth, Britain's Deputy High Commissioner in Canberra and head of the UK delegation, speaking at the Summit. Photo: Group on Earth Observation (GEO)

discussions was how the role and significance of public/private partnerships appears to be growing. Trends suggest that companies are now proactively responding – often faster than governments – to the ever-increasing global challenges. For the first time, representatives from commercial, non-governmental, not-for-profit and civil society organisations can join GEO as Associate Members to better facilitate collaboration with governments and international organisations.

For me, the inclusion of the Industry Track, and subsequent announcement that it will also feature in GEO Week 2020 in South Africa, demonstrated

a new willingness by government organisations to collaborate more with industry partners. Despite the present uncertain political climate, it was clear that Britain's scientists remain committed to GEO and will continue to support collaborative efforts on a global basis.

1. https://www.earthobservations.org/geoss_wp.php
2. <http://earthobservations.org/geoglam.php>
3. <https://www.earthobservations.org/activity.php?id=129>
4. <https://www.earthobservations.org/article.php?id=386>
5. <https://www.digitalearthfranca.org/about>

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