Statement to the media

Drought research faces bleak future

Regina, January 28, 2009 - Over 75 scientists and government officials from Canada and the United States met in Regina, Saskatchewan on January 26 -28, 2009 to review work emerging from the Drought Research Initiative (DRI). DRI, a Canadian climate research network, is conducting Canada's first comprehensive study of drought. It focuses on the multiyear event of 1999 to 2004 that affected all of the Canadian Prairies. That Prairies drought accounted for most of Canada's economic drought loss of $6 billion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the loss of 41,000 jobs during 2001-2002.

Many scientists expect severe droughts to become more frequent and more intense due to climate change. DRI is improving predictions of drought onset and intensity, and the effects on groundwater and surface water using state-of-the-art computer simulations. The network is developing a Drought Early Warning System (DEWS) which will assist federal and provincial agriculture agencies with policy and planning activities. The work of the research consortium will help agencies respond to drought more efficiently and effectively, resulting in savings conservatively estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars per year of drought.

The DRI network is funded for five years by the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences (CFCAS) - the main funding body for university–based climate research in Canada. Participants at the Regina workshop were gravely concerned that the 2009 federal budget did not include support for environmental research. They were also concerned at the lack of funding for the Foundation, whose current mandate ends in March 2011. The loss of CFCAS and its support will mean that the drought research will end before its benefits are fully realized. In addition, the delegates were concerned that the expertise developed will be dispersed, with some skilled people going to other countries just when Canada may be facing another major drought. This concern was summarized by the Chairman of the DRI Board of Directors, Dr. Jim Bruce, who observed, "As we move into an information economy, understanding the characteristics of drought and other extremes as well as their impacts on water resources is essential to ensuring Canada's efficiency and competitiveness." DRI is an effective vehicle for achieving this goal.

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