

POLITICS AND POLICY

Summit Seeks Complete View Of Earth's Climate, Weather

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WASHINGTON -- Ministers from 27 countries plan to meet here next week to devise a plan for closing the many "blind spots" in civilian systems that measure the planet's climate change and monitor weather patterns.

The Bush administration, sponsor of the "Earth Observation Summit," believes that the information from improved coordination between satellites, ocean buoys and land-based monitoring systems will aid both scientific and humanitarian efforts. It also sees billions of dollars in commercial spinoffs.

"The ocean is vastly underobserved and underexplored," says Conrad C. Lautenbacher, U.S. undersecretary of commerce. The Commerce and Energy departments are hosting the event. Mr. Lautenbacher says that while the U.S. has space satellites that monitor weather patterns, forecasters need more data on oceans -- sea-surface temperatures and movements of undersea currents -- to get a complete picture of weather and climate change.

Mr. Lautenbacher, a retired Navy vice admiral, says the goal of the meeting is to develop "the political willpower" among industrial nations, and developing nations who want to use such data, to establish uniform rules for sharing it and to generate financial aid to fill the gaps.

He notes that 40% of the \$10 trillion U.S. economy is affected by weather and climate changes and predicts that farmers, scientists and many others would benefit from improved global weather data. Insurance companies, for example, use it to price and sell "weather derivatives," or policies that protect companies against damage from adverse weather changes.

While they applaud the Bush administration's push for more research, environmental groups charge that it may be intended to divert attention from the fact that the U.S. is one of the few industrial nations that hasn't agreed to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other man-made pollutants that are thought to be warming the atmosphere. "We can't afford to wait for 10 or 15 years for more data before we decide to act," says Alden Meyer, a spokesman for the Union of Concerned Scientists.

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Updated July 28, 2003 12:23 a.m.