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European Commission's scientists re-launch desertification research

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) is intensifying and globalising its research activities relating to desertification and drought. The JRC recently set up a new research team (<http://desert.jrc.ec.europa.eu>) with a view to developing benchmarks and indicators for monitoring and assessing desertification processes on a range of geographic scales. The research team is already engaged in several regional and global networks, providing support to policy makers at a European level and beyond. It also provides scientific support for the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) ten-year implementation strategy and reform process. The Commission's renewed interest in desertification and 'dryland' science is beginning to produce results.

As a member of the *Dryland Science for Development (DSD) consortium*¹, the JRC is preparing an important scientific conference being part of the 2009 session of the UNCCD Committee on Science and Technology (CST). This event will take place in conjunction with the 9th UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP9) in late 2009 and will have as its goal the sharing of the latest global results of research on desertification processes in order to generate concise and targeted policy recommendations in the medium term.

At the end of 2008, the JRC also organised an international meeting on the development of a new **World Atlas of Desertification** in collaboration with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Attended by specialists from around the world, the meeting resulted in a draft concept and roadmap towards a new digital atlas within two to three years. The new atlas should provide highly valuable information for sustainability policies at local, regional and global scales, especially given ongoing dramatic changes in our environment.

Over thirty years after the United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD) held in Nairobi in 1977, and thirteen years after the ratification of the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in 1996, global scientific commitment on the issue of arable or habitable land's transformation into desert, through change in climate or destructive land use, is beginning to bear

¹ <http://www.drylandscience.org>

fruit. A special feature on "**Climate Change and Desertification**"² in the journal *Global and Planetary Change*, published in December 2008, was edited by JRC scientists along with colleagues from the South African Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and Australia's Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (CRC). This edition also contains the conclusions of a *Global Change Research Workshop* organised by the JRC in Wengen, Switzerland, in 2007, to collate learning on desertification processes over the previous three decades and on best practice in monitoring and modelling for the phenomenon.

Desertification directly or indirectly affects a billion people and as much as one third of the planet's surface. Specialists worldwide have teamed up to tackle this major environmental issue from a scientific point of view, sharing their knowledge globally and rendering the trends much more visible with latest digital mapping techniques.

Climate change and drought

Climate change predictions for Europe indicate an increased likelihood for severe summer droughts in the Mediterranean as well as Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The JRC is responding to this challenge, providing timely information on droughts and associated risks at European, national and regional levels through its Institute for Environment and Sustainability (IES) in Ispra (Italy), which has developed a prototype **European Drought Observatory (EDO)**³ for drought forecasting, assessment and monitoring. A first web-based map-server providing European scale information on a test basis was launched in December 2008. EDO is currently being further improved in close collaboration with EU Member States and regional authorities in the field.

For further information: <http://ies.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

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² *Global and Planetary Change*, Vol. 64, Issues 3-4, Dec. 2008

³ <http://edo.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>