Environment

Spy agency shares data on climate change

The Obama Administration has resurrected a collaborative programme that gives climate scientists access to data obtained by Earth-monitoring satellites owned by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The initiative will allow climate scientists to gather data on remote regions of the Earth without needing to launch their own satellites and with much greater precision than is otherwise possible.

The programme, dubbed the Measurement of Earth Data for Environmental Analysis (Medea), involves about 60 academic, industrial and government scientists who each have security clearance. They will work under the guidance of the National Academy of Sciences. According to atmospheric scientist Norbert Untersteiner from the University of Washington, the CIA images are particularly valuable for assessing changes in the ice coverage of the Arctic Ocean that could offer clues to the dynamics of global warming.

Medea started in 1992 following discussions between Senator Al Gore and Robert Gates, then head of the CIA and now defence secretary in the Obama Administration. However, the programme was cancelled in 2001

Bleak outlook

The Measurement of Earth Data for Environmental Analysis will use CIA satellites to monitor ice coverage in the Arctic Ocean.

during the Bush Administration. Although the reasons for the withdrawal remain unclear, the administration was known to be sceptical of any link between human activity and global warming. Medea's resumption late last year followed by a CIA announcement in September that it had opened the Center on Climate Change and National Security at its headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Its opening provided official recognition of the security implications of environmental issues. The centre will

provide support for US policymakers when they are negotiating and implementing international agreements on environmental issues.

"Decision-makers need information and analysis on the effects climate change can have on security," CIA director Leon Panetta said at a press conference announcing the climate change centre. "The CIA is well positioned to deliver that intelligence." However, there have been complaints about the new centre. John Barrasso, a Republican senator in Wyoming, complained that the agency should not be "spying on sea lions".

The CIA insists that its environmental information gathering does not prejudice its overall security mission. Medea, the agency states, will use images and other resources that it has already gathered. It adds that such a programme offers the agency the advantage of maintaining contact with academic departments and think tanks that are also tackling the issue of environmental change. Scientists are now analysing images obtained by satellites in the 1990s to suggest new tasks for the programme.

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CERN collisions light up Copenhagen

Anyone passing by the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark, might be startled by some strange moving lights on the facade of the institute's main building. In fact, the dancing beams show, almost in real time, collisions from the ATLAS experiment at CERN's Large Hadron Collider (LHC). Dubbed the Colliderscope, the display contains nearly a hundred diode lamps and was created by artists Christian Skeel and Morten Skriver with help from physicists Clive Ellegaard and Troels Peterson at the institute. The Colliderscope lights up whenever ATLAS's "transition radiation tracker detector" – designed by researchers at the institute – picks up a signal as a charged particle passes through it. The particle's track is then displayed onto the facade. Set to run until 2011, the project began last month and has been supported by the Danish Arts Agency, the Velux Foundation, which provides funding for scientific, cultural, artistic and social projects, and the Niels Bohr Institute.

Michael Banks

● colliderscope.nbi.dk