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United States Announces SilvaCarbon Program for Improving Forest and Terrestrial Carbon Monitoring Worldwide under the Group on Earth Observations (GEO)

BEIJING – Today, at the Seventh Plenary meeting of the intergovernmental Group on Earth Observations (GEO) in Beijing, China, the United States announced details about an innovative new program, SilvaCarbon, designed to strengthen global capacity to understand, monitor, and manage forest and terrestrial carbon.

"Now more than ever, the international community has a special interest in advancing our understanding and monitoring of the world's forests," said Sherburne Abbott, Associate Director for Environment at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and GEO Co-Chair and Principal for the United States. "In particular, the science of how forests store carbon, both above ground and in the soil, is of profound importance and requires further monitoring and investigation. We want to cooperate more closely with our partners in GEO in this area, to protect and make most effective use of our forests, to avoid harmful deforestation and land-degradation, and to better understand how forests store and release carbon and other greenhouse gases."

SilvaCarbon is a flagship program that supports the Administration's comprehensive strategy for fast start financing for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and enhancing forest carbon stocks (REDD+) in developing countries, announced on October 28. REDD+ is a priority of the Administration, which has dedicated $1 billion between 2010 and 2012 to help countries slow, halt, and reverse deforestation as a key strategic component of the U.S. "fast start" climate financing announced in the context of the Copenhagen Accord. USAID and the U.S. State Department are supporting the program in cooperation with other Federal agencies such as U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Smithsonian Institution, and NASA.

SilvaCarbon, named after the Latin word for forest, will bring together a community of U.S. scientists and technical experts from government, academia, non-governmental organizations, and industry into a network that will support the current efforts of GEO to improve access to Earth observation data about forests. These investments in the science will promote a better understanding not only of the changes in land cover, but also of the effectiveness of various efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions from land use change. They can thus help promote transparency in national and international mitigation actions in this critical sector, and strengthen multilateral efforts to combat climate change as they inform countries on the best ways to design and improve such policies going forward.

Maura O'Neill, USAID Senior Counselor to the Administrator and Chief Innovation Officer, said the SilvaCarbon program will provide new affordable technologies to help people in communities and nations around the world better manage and protect their forests. "USAID sees these technologies as a key to providing a smart international framework for REDD+ and to creating profitable local economies," O'Neill said.

In establishing SilvaCarbon, the United States joins the governments of Australia, Norway, Canada, and Japan, along with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in co-leading the GEO Forest Carbon Tracking task, a component of the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS). Under the task, experts work at selected sites around the world, called national demonstrators, to provide large-scale examples of how to monitor forest and terrestrial carbon, compare methodologies and approaches, and build capacity of developing countries on the latest science and technology to track their forest carbon.

Some 85 nations, the European Commission and 58 international organizations are coordinating their Earth observation assets and strategies through GEO to build GEOSS. They are sharing and interlinking their systems for tracking global trends in carbon levels, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, water resources, ocean temperatures and other critical indicators of planetary health and human well-being. GEO was established in 2005 after the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the Group of Eight leading industrialized countries (G8), and three ministerial Earth Observation Summits all called for improving existing observation systems.

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