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EXPERTS REVIEW GLOBAL DROUGHT RISKS AND RECOMMEND IMPROVED MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR DROUGHT RISK REDUCTION

Geneva/Boulder/Washington DC, 29 September 2010 (WMO) – Early, accessible and continually updated information is an essential part of improved management of drought risks to reduce drought impacts, according to a group of international scientists at a conference this week. Case studies presented from different regions point to the importance of improved monitoring of droughts for effective early warnings. One important recommendation calls for implementation of policies that emphasize coordinated drought preparedness planning. There is a need for services that link forecasts and impacts assessments with decision-making so that communities benefit from early warning information systems and drought risk mitigation.

The recommendations were presented at a meeting organized from 27 to 29 September in Boulder, Colorado, USA, by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), WMO and the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR).

Several intense droughts and heat waves in recent years, such as those in southeast Australia in 2009, and Argentina in 2008/09, have increased concern that droughts may be increasing in frequency. Millions of people face drinking water shortages in southwestern China this year because of a once-a-century drought that has dried up rivers and threatens vast farmlands. From January to August 2010, serious to severe rainfall deficiencies occurred over much of Western Australia, and areas of lowest on record rainfall have intensified in the southwestern region. In southwest Western Australia in particular, below average rainfall in the months of April to August has resulted in record or near record low rainfall in the region. This year in Russia, the highest recorded temperatures ever seen in 130 years of recordkeeping occurred with the most widespread drought in more than three decades and massive wildfires stretched across seven regions, including Moscow.

Given the growing frequency of occurrence of droughts in Africa and their impact on subsistence farmers, the meeting reviewed three important case studies in East Africa (by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network), in West Africa (by the AGRHYMET Regional Centre in Niger) and Southern Africa (by the South African Weather Service). These case studies emphasized the need to address the vulnerability of the poorer sections of society to drought impacts through more effective early warning systems to facilitate proactive action to deal with droughts; improved networking among various ministries and agencies coordinating drought relief activities; and an efficient policy framework that includes information on how affected communities can be helped quickly to mitigate the impacts of droughts.

The meeting in Boulder is a follow-up to the Inter-Regional Workshop on Indices and Early Warning Systems for Drought (University of Nebraska-Lincoln in December 2009) and the meeting of the Expert Group on Agricultural Drought Indices (Murcia, Spain in June 2010) which were organized by WMO, the UNISDR, NOAA, the School of Natural Resources and the National Drought Mitigation Centre of the University of Nebraska, and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). These meetings culminated in the adoption of recommendations to use the Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI) to characterize meteorological droughts and the development of common frameworks for national agricultural drought early warning systems.

Commenting on the importance of the case studies on the drought risks, Mr Andrew Maskrey, Coordinator of the 2011 UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (GAR-11) mentioned that cases from all regions have highlighted a growing vulnerability of rural households and communities to drought, particularly in areas with high levels of poverty and dependent on rain-fed, subsistence agriculture. Very few countries have national drought risk management policy frameworks at the present time, meaning that growing capacities in data collection and analysis on meteorological and hydrological drought into decision making are not necessarily being factored into planning and public investment. The analysis of the case studies will feed into a chapter of the 2011 Report, which will be launched at the 3rd session of the Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction in May 2011 in Geneva.

Dr Roger Pulwarty, Director of the US/NOAA National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) emphasized that the cases clearly illustrate the multidimensional nature of drought and its impacts as these filter through diverse economic activities such as agriculture, forestry, tourism and energy development and through ecosystem services that support water supply and quality. The case studies clearly illustrate the need to move forward with developing usable indicators for characterizing and communicating drought risks and for more proactive drought management approaches.

Dr Mannava Sivakumar, Director of the Climate Prediction and Adaptation Branch of WMO mentioned that WMO welcomes the collaboration with the UNISDR and NOAA in addressing the issue of drought risk management and in developing more effective early warning systems for helping the vulnerable communities, especially in the developing and least developed countries. He expressed the hope that the standardized indices and common frameworks that will emerge out of this collaborative effort between the three agencies will help all the agencies and institutions concerned with the monitoring and management of droughts around the world.

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