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**Permanent Committee for the
Spatial Data Infrastructure for the Americas Presentation**

Title: The Establishment of the Permanent Committee for the Spatial Data Infrastructure for the Americas as an appropriate venue to promote national and regional spatial data development, integration and accessibility in the Americas

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Background:

For many years now the community of spatial data producers and spatial data users in the Americas has felt the need to constitute a political and administrative regional body that promotes and coordinates the development and integration of geospatial information, fosters the creation of appropriate search and retrieval mechanisms to facilitate its exploration, and guides the establishment of relevant standards and protocols for spatial data production, validation, storage, and dissemination.

Several factors have reinforced this need: existing national SDI initiatives lacked regional focus and political backing; there was a strong need to improve spatial data availability to support better project formulation and decision-making at the regional level; successful regional experiences such as SIRGAS and the Electronic Atlas made bold regional initiatives look feasible; existing national Clearinghouses lacked an appropriate institutional framework in which to operate; and there was a growing awareness about the direct relationship between information, economic growth and development in the region.

A first attempt towards the creation of a regional body was made by the establishment of the Interamerican Geospatial Data Network in 1994, under the aegis of the U.S. Geological Survey Earth Resources Observation System Data Center, with wide support from the countries of the region. In 1997, a resolution by the 7th UN Regional Cartographic Conference for the Americas called for the creation of a spatial data infrastructure for the continent, and the establishment of a regional body to oversee its development. Responding to this mandate, representatives of American geospatial institutes met in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, during March 2000 to formally establish the Permanent Committee for the Spatial Data Infrastructure for the Americas (PC IDEA).

Today, PC IDEA is a dynamic forum for the promotion of spatial data creation, use and dissemination, and for the exchange of technical expertise and best practices amongst the spatial data community in the region. 24 member countries have pledged their support for this initiative (participating institutions are highlighted):

- Argentina - Geographic Military Institute
- Belize – Ministry of Natural Resources
- Bolivia - Geographic Military Institute
- Brasil - Geography & Statistics Institute
- Canada - Ministry of Environment
- Colombia - National Geographic Institute
- Costa Rica - National Geographic Institute
- Chile - Geographic Military Institute
- Cuba - Army Corps
- Dominican Republic - Geographic Military Institute
- Ecuador - Geographic Military Institute
- El Salvador - National Geographic Institute
- Guatemala - National Geographic Institute
- Guyana - Natural Resource Project
- Honduras - National Geographic Institute
- Jamaica - National Land Agency
- Mexico - National Institute for Statistics, Geography and IT
- Nicaragua - Survey Institute
- Panama - National Geographic Institute
- Paraguay - Geographic Military Institute
- Peru - National Geographic Institute
- Uruguay - Geographic Military Institute
- USA - US Geological Survey
- Venezuela - National Geographic Institute

The objectives of PC IDEA are to:

- Develop technical and political guidelines for the production and use of spatial data
- Promote NSDIs development
- Promote data sharing and interoperability
- Stimulate cooperation, research and best practices
- Define guidelines and strategies for the incorporation of cadastral data in NSDIs.

PC IDEA Today

Five years have gone by since the creation of PC IDEA in 1997. The organization stands out today as the principal American forum striving to maximize the economic, social and environmental benefits derived from the use of geospatial information in the region, and promoting the development of national and regional spatial data infrastructures in concordance with the Agenda 21 mandate (see <http://www.igac.gov.co/cpidea/>)

Its core vision today is to foster significant improvements in the production and accessibility of relevant national and regional spatial data in the Americas, with a view to improved decision making in key areas like sustainable development, land use planning and cadastral systems; seeking to achieve the placing of geoinformation as an strategic development sector, an increase in the benefits derived from the use of geographic information, and a better provision of geospatial knowledge capabilities through the hemisphere; while contributing to national, regional and global mapping efforts.

The Instituto Geografico Agustin Codazzi (IGAC) in Colombia provides secretariat support for PC IDEA. The Committee members come from the main national institutions in charge of spatial data development. Coordination is in the hands of a Board of Director, whose members are elected for a period that corresponds to the interval between two consecutives UN Regional Cartographic Conferences.

PC IDEA's technical work is undertaken by several workgroups, organized around thematic areas as follows:

- The Legal and Economic Affairs Workgroup
- The Communications Workgroup
- The Technical Issues Workgroup, covering topics like Information Policies, Standards (FGDC and ISO), Core Data Sets, Clearinghouses
- The Cadastral Workgroup
- The Geographic Names Workgroup
- The Institutional Strengthening Workgroup

PC IDEA and its members have been instrumental in the promotion and development of national spatial data infrastructures. Colombia has provided a working model for some of these, due to the early creation of the ICDE (Colombian Infrastructure for Spatial Data) and its substantial stage of development. More recently countries like El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have formalized agreements to establish their own NSDIs. Countries like Venezuela, Nicaragua, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic might follow suit in the short term.

PC IDEA, with support from the USGS/Earth Resources Observation Systems Data Center (EDC), the Pan-American Institute for Geography and History (PAIGH) and national partner institutions, is promoting the development of national and regional clearinghouse systems, using the Federal Geographic Data Committee metadata standard, to describe, access, and disseminate geospatial data. The Clearinghouse system provides an ideal mechanism for the exploration and retrieval of spatial data sets. The countries of the region have made great progress over the last three years in the establishment and consolidation of institutional and national Clearinghouse nodes - fully searchable through Internet gateway portals. Countries like Venezuela, Uruguay, Mexico and Chile have over a short period of time cataloged and made available on-line more than 1,000 metadata data sets. The Venezuelan Geographic Institute alone has cataloged more than 7,000 spatial data sets over the last year. Uruguay has developed a sophisticated Clearinghouse WEB Site, with access not only to the data catalog, but also to a full range of spatial services, as well as interactive Internet Map Servers that allow users to manipulate maps on-line and consult ancillary data. More information on <http://www1.igvsb.gov.ve/clearinghouse>, <http://www.clearinghouse.com.uy/>.

The Road ahead

Several challenges for the consolidation of PC IDEA and its role as a regional entity remain. Given the vast geographical scope of the region, the many languages spoken, variable levels of development amongst its members, and sometimes conflicting views on the best approaches to follow, PC IDEA has been forced to drive along a bumpy path. A strong dedication to consensus building and concerted action has made the drive smoother than it could have been otherwise. Member countries have recently agreed on a charter course.

Over the next few years PC IDEA will concentrate its efforts on the following activity areas:

- The development of quality standards for geographic information;
- The development of a standard related to a basic geographic object catalogue;
- The development of terminology standards;
- The development of land parcel classification standards;
- The recognition of the geographic sector as strategic for development;
- The improvement of geodata production and data access;
- The promotion of PC IDEA within the local geographic community at each country;
- The incorporation of new ICT to improve competitiveness;
- The development and strengthening of national geospatial catalogues (clearinghouses)

Strong backing by the United Nations, international and regional organizations, and member countries and associated institutions, coupled with a clear vision and a successful history of accomplishment speak well for the future of this regional initiative of great importance for the spatial data community of the Americas and the globe.