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NEWS RELEASE

UN Convention on Desertification Designates GEF as a Source of Funding for Projects in Developing Countries

Havana, Cuba, September 5, 2003 – The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has designated the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as a financial mechanism to assist developing countries in implementing the Convention. The decision was made by more than 100 countries attending an international meeting in Havana that ended today, UNCCD's Sixth Session of the Conference of the Parties.

“The decision to designate GEF as a financial mechanism of the Convention will strengthen the GEF response to desertification, a problem that threatens the livelihoods of approximately 1.2 billion people and affects a third of the earth's land,” said Len Good, CEO and Chairman of the Global Environment Facility.

GEF expects to commit more than US\$500 million between 2003 and 2006 to projects that will help reduce land degradation by promoting sustainable and innovative land management practices in developing countries. This will be the largest financial commitment for activities related to UNCCD since it entered into force in 1996. UNCCD is the only binding international legal instrument to address the issue of desertification, a form of land degradation that occurs in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas.

Approximately \$250 million of the US\$500 million is expected to be devoted to projects related to one of GEF's six project focal areas, land degradation (primarily desertification and deforestation). An additional US\$250 million has been allocated for activities that address land degradation in conjunction with GEF projects in the areas of biodiversity, climate change, persistent organic pollutants, and international waters. The US\$500 million in GEF funds is expected to leverage a significant amount of cofinancing from other sources.

GEF projects that address land degradation issues take a broad, integrated approach to meet multiple ecological, economic, and social goals. For example:

- In Kenya, GEF support helped launch an integrated conservation and development project in the Lake Baringo region wherein a variety of local partners addressed biodiversity loss, land degradation, and lack of water management—the root causes of poverty and scarcity of food in the region. Farmers adopted techniques to prevent soil erosion. Now the area's old abundance of wildlife, food, and productive land and water is beginning to show signs of returning. The project is part of a larger effort by GEF to promote sustainable land management practices in Africa, where 65 percent of agricultural land is degraded.
- In China, a US\$15 million GEF grant is supporting a government campaign to protect the dry and highly fragile environments of the country's impoverished western region. The livelihoods of the region's 355 million residents, as well as critical habitats and endangered species, are being threatened by land degradation. The GEF grant will be used to help coordinate the government's efforts and engage local residents in hands-on conservation solutions. In addition to direct environmental, economic, and social benefits to local communities, the GEF project will generate global benefits such as improved biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration.
- In Latin America, an innovative pilot project, funded by a US\$4.77 million GEF grant and US\$3.9 million in cofinancing from other sources, seeks to improve degraded pasturelands in Colombia, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. The project will reduce erosion and improve soil and water quality, promoting increased production, income, and employment in rural areas that are home to poor farmers.

Since 1991, GEF's work to preserve biodiversity, reduce the risks of climate change, protect the ozone layer, and clean up international waters has had the added benefit of strengthening sustainable land management. In response to the increasing threat of land degradation around the world, the GEF Assembly decided in October 2002 to designate a new focal area that concentrates on land degradation, primarily desertification and deforestation.

About the GEF

The Global Environment Facility, an international financial organization with 175 member countries, acts as a major catalyst for improving the global environment. GEF's mandate is to make the connection between local and global environmental challenges, and between national and international efforts to conserve biodiversity, reduce the risks of climate change, protect the ozone layer, clean up international waters, combat land degradation, and phase out persistent organic pollutants.

Since its creation in 1991, the GEF has allocated US\$4.5 billion in grants to support more than 1,200 projects in 140 developing nations and countries with economies in transition. In addition, GEF has committed approximately US \$117.35 million in small grants to NGOs and community groups in developing countries, directly involving them in addressing global environmental problems.

A recent assessment by an independent panel of experts finds that the GEF has been a “catalyst for innovative programs” and has produced “significant results” to improve the global environment.

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