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All over the map

Geospatial project has long reach

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If you're familiar with MapQuest, you're familiar with the notion of geospatial information.

Which would make you entirely comfortable in a session at this year's Lac Carling Congress. It was about how technology and partnerships work together to provide geospatial information through the Canadian Geospatial Data Infrastructure (CGDI).

The project, GeoConnections, is a \$60 million partnership led by Natural Resources Canada aimed at making Canada's geographic information (geospatial data and tools) accessible over the Internet. The venture involves major investments from several public agencies (who provide most of the data), all levels of government, the private sector, the academic community and community-based organisations. It is part of a global effort -- involving around 147 countries -- aimed at gathering and providing geospatial information.

Geospatial data, often represented in maps, is made up of geographic coordinates that include latitude, longitude and (sometimes) altitude. The CGDI interconnected network includes data, services, applications/technology and policies. The information is expected to enable better business and policy decision-making, as well as value-added commercial activities.

For example, the Atlas of Canada Web site provides regularly updated information on forest fire hotspots and an economic environment index. Elsewhere, Agriculture and Agrifood Canada is taking part in the project to illustrate the various plant hardiness zones of Canada. TrailPaq, a site developed in partnership with private sector organizations, provides information for hikers.

Other applications include the B.C. Terrain Resource Inventory, the Canadian Information System for the Environment (CISE), and disease surveillance sites supported by Health Canada.

The project has several objectives.

Overall, it aims to increase the amount of geospatial information and services available online, advance data integration issues and standardization, expand the use and application of geo-information by working with user communities-of-practice, promote the development of innovative technology, and make it easier to use and resell geo-information.

GeoConnections achieves these objectives in many ways. There are user sites, such as the Atlas of Canada, an online portal focused on citizens. There is GeoInnovations, focused on developing industrial technology through partnerships, as well as a GeoSkills network aimed at supporting the development of knowledge workers.

There is a Sustainable Communities Initiative, in which GeoConnections and 109 communities, including remote and Aboriginal communities, are working to bridge the digital divide in rural communities. The GeoPartners Secretariat provides the national partnership with policy and communications support.

From a technology perspective, GeoConnections works with data and service providers to provide an enabling infrastructure for client applications in areas such as health, the environment and disaster management, and spatial data infrastructure. The various federal and provincial/territorial geospatial initiatives feed into CGDI. The project is now at the interconnectivity stage, and is moving toward interoperability. It has adopted recognized standards, rather than creating its own.

The initiative is targeting three prime client groups. One group is defined broadly as "citizens," with an emphasis on youth and what is called an "aware public," such as hikers who are replacing expensive paper maps with electronic ones. Citizens typically access the Atlas of Canada: the site gets 350,000 hits a month, with a peak between 3 and 8 pm when students are typically doing their homework. Hikers, obviously, are inclined to use the TrailPaq site.

The second group includes experts, scientists, academia and government. An example of a product aimed at this group is the GeoBase portal that provides technical geospatial information. A third and largest group includes all levels of government and its partners. An example of a product targeted at this group is the GeoConnections Discovery Portal, with 535 Canadian and 1385 international contributing organisations.

This site has 1,423 Canadian data products (112 searchable) and 11,585 (153 searchable) international ones.

Toby Fyfe is a federal public servant in Ottawa and a long-time participant in the Lac Carling Congress.

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