

EU-Australia Partnerships

Last week, I was extremely pleased to accompany our latest trade mission with 7 European companies to Australia. The goal was to enable meetings between potential partners to work together on EO geospatial services in the context of the Copernicus agreement signed between the EU and Australia. One further partnership was cemented during the week through an MoU between EARSC and CRCSI.

Both Geoscience Australia and CRC for Spatial Information (CRCSI) coordinated 4 days of meetings and I feel really proud that EARSC was able to work with them during the week. Only recently has EARSC developed the capacity to undertake this type of support activity which we continue to expand upon. I believe there is enormous potential to develop some deep and lasting business partnerships. Graeme Kernich and especially Phil Delaney, both from CRCSI, did a fantastic job in setting up the programme.

We started on Monday in Brisbane hosted by QUT with 30 Australian EO companies meeting with the 7 European companies who had made the trip. We learned that Queensland is very advanced in the use of EO to support state-wide decision making and I explained how Copernicus is set-up in Europe and what the potential partnership opportunities could be. There is a strong willingness to exploit the free and open data policy to promote business.

One of the key instruments is H2020 where a call later this year will enable European and Australian companies to work together. Whilst Australia is a partner to H2020, this specific call under the space activity is aimed to strengthen international ties and as such Australian companies will be able to receive funding just as any European company. Whilst this funding is limited, if we can demonstrate successful co-operations, the programme line could be extended in the future. Paul Nugent and I explained how H2020 works and how teams could be set-up to respond successfully.

On Tuesday we moved on to Canberra, the political capital of Australia, and a meeting with Geoscience Australia to hear about their work and especially on the Data cube approach which they have pioneered. Adam Lewis explained the background and the opportunity to work together. Personally, I see a lot of potential there for an interesting project and commercial opportunities.

We also heard about Geoscape which is an interesting initiative by PSMA. Geoscape seeks to provide the answer to the question "What is at an address?" PSMA was established some 20 years ago to commercialise government-owned digital map data; which is a business model under threat from the open data movement. PSMA has taken the initiative to stay ahead by supplying high-resolution geospatial data across Australia. The main source of content is coming from satellites and PSMA are steadily adding features into the Geoscape product. It is definitely an area to watch with potential for international co-operation.

We were joined in Canberra by Andreas Veispak from the EC and were really pleased to have his direct support. One of the main interests in Australia is the access to and exploitation of Copernicus data. At the time of the visit, Australia was one of only 2 countries to have signed an agreement with the EU to access the Sentinel data and collaboration between enterprises will be a major achievement.

With this in mind, EARSC and CRCSI signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work more closely together. We are extremely pleased to have such an able partner to work with in Australia and look forward to realising some of the potential. We were also extremely pleased that the EC Commissioner Bienkowska was able to be present and witness the signature placing a political recognition to the potential for co-operation.

The signing ceremony preceded a special panel which discussed how to develop greater co-operation. Commissioner Elzbieta Bienkowska made a short introduction which was followed by a lively debate between European actors (Andreas Veispak – EC, EARSC - myself) and Australian actors (Kate Lundy – former senator, Adam Lewis – Geosciences Australia, Graeme Kernich – CRCSI, David Williams – CSIRO). Australia is making a great effort to free up companies to commercialise the results of research. They have managed to develop a whole space programme and convince ministers to establish a space agency despite not having and upstream (space manufacturing) capabilities. Commercialisation will be the key to enabling partnerships with Europe.

On Thursday we moved on to our last destination in Sydney; hosted by CSIRO. Here the focus was more downstream and a panel of companies using geospatial data and information talked about their needs. There was a strong awareness in the insurance, agriculture, mining and natural resources sectors as well as the public need reflected by governments. It provided an excellent exchange between suppliers and consumers.

What do I take-away from the week? Companies wishing to work in Australia or with Australian partners can do so. The world is shrinking with digital technology but this does not replace face-to-face meetings and those who made the effort to travel will have an advantage when it comes to doing business. This will not be the only opportunity and we are serious about developing the MoU with CRCSI. One very useful outcome is linked to an internationalisation project we have funded under COSME. IDEEO will set out a strategy for EARSC and 2 other clusters on how to promote international business in a co-ordinated way and focused on specific downstream sectors. The mission allowed us (EARSC) to identify a number of partners with whom we can develop our strategy which will benefit the whole EO community and EARSC members in particular.

Different parts of the EO and geospatial value-chains will see and be able to address different opportunities for co-operation. We consider that it was a highly successful and highly significant mission which we are pleased to have been able to put together. We see return visits as well as missions to other countries over the next years as we develop our mission to help the industry identify new business opportunities.