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Lao Minister of Agriculture and Forestry opens new International Water Management Institute office in Vientiane

Investment in Lao PDR emphasizes critical period in the development of the Mekong Basin

VIENTIANE (12 October 2011). H.E. Mr. Vilayvanh Phomkhe, the Lao PDR Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, will today open a new regional office for the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) in Vientiane. Dr. Colin Chartres, Director General of IWMI will attend the launch.

“We are delighted to be expanding in Laos at this exciting time,” says Dr Chartres. “This is major investment by IWMI and its funding agencies and a demonstration of our confidence that our regional collaborators understand the value of scientific research in agriculture and are keen to partner with us in future. IWMI’s focus is to provide land and water policy makers and managers the scientific evidence that can be used as a basis for sound decision making on sustainable development.”

“Managing land and water resources in a sustainable manner is important for Lao people“, says Bounthong Bouahom, Director General of the Lao National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute where the new office is sited. “In particular with the increased speed in development in Lao PDR and neighboring countries due to many local and global drivers of change, the presence of IWMI-SEA Office in Vientiane will provide excellent opportunities to Lao scientists in interacting and collaborating with international researchers to identify the most suitable alternatives for managing our natural resources.”

Staff at the new IWMI South East Asia office will work with scientists from Lao PDR, and other countries the region to provide vital hydrological and economic data and to help build local research capacity. Key research areas will include assessing the impacts of climate and land use change on water availability, the relationship between water and food security, poverty alleviation and the development of sustainable agricultural systems. Dr Chartres pointed out that the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), of which IWMI is a member, is undergoing major reform at present and one of the outcomes will be the development of new research programs involving other CGIAR centres in the region and local partners from government and international agencies.

“This is a critical time for the Mekong River Basin,” says IWMI’s Asia Regional Director Peter McCornick. “Major water related infrastructure developments are planned at many sites along the river system. Planners and policy makers need to be able to make informed decisions about what kinds of developments are appropriate and how they should be managed. New construction and water management practices will undoubtedly bring many benefits and open up new opportunities.

But more scientific research will help to make sure that issues of equity and sustainability for all river users are properly addressed.”

The new office is also a timely reminder of the need for new research into the likely effects of climate change on the Mekong. Recently IWMI and partners have used computer modeling to make projections about how a rise in temperature might affect both the river and those whose livelihoods depend upon it. “Rainfall patterns and river flows could change dramatically over the next few decades,” says Chu Thai Hoanh, principal researcher on water resources based at the new IWMI office. “We need more research to enable policy makers to respond to these challenges and devise strategies to protect the most vulnerable. Managing the river for the benefit of people, livelihoods and the environment is likely to become an increasingly complex business.”

The new IWMI office will not solely implement research in Lao PDR, but in the whole of South East Asia, and particularly in the Mekong countries. Vientiane was selected as the most appropriate location as it is in the heart of the Mekong region and home to many other organizations with an interest in the river basin, including the Mekong River Commission.

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The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) is a nonprofit, scientific research organization focusing on the sustainable use of water and land resources in agriculture, to benefit poor people in developing countries. IWMI’s mission is “Improving the management of water and land resources for food, livelihoods and the environment.” IWMI has its headquarters in Sri Lanka and regional offices in Africa and Asia. The Institute works in partnership with developing countries, international and national research institutes, universities and other organizations to develop tools and technologies that contribute to poverty reduction as well as food and livelihood security. www.iwmi.org

The **Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)** is a global partnership that unites organizations engaged in research for sustainable development with the funders of this work. The partnership’s mission is to reduce poverty and hunger, improve human health and nutrition, and enhance ecosystem resilience in developing countries through high-quality science that achieves global impact. The funders include developing and industrialized country governments, foundations, and international and regional organizations. The work they support is carried out by international research centers in close collaboration with hundreds of partner organizations, including national and regional research institutes, civil society organizations and the private sector. The CGIAR generates international public goods that are available to all. www.cgiar.org