Rock scientists to make map of the world

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By Jeremy Lovell
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Rock scientists from across the world will start next week to put together the first geological map of earth in a bid to better understand the planet.
The OneGeology project, bringing together scientists from more than 55 countries, will pool national geological survey information and present it on the Internet for all to see rather like Google Earth already does with satellite images.
In doing so it will not only provide people with access to the first detailed images of the ground beneath their feet but also expose the yawning gaps that exist in knowledge.
"The geological data exists. What we are trying to do is unlock it and make it universally available," Ian Jackson of the British Geological Survey told a news conference on Thursday. "It is like piecing together a global jigsaw puzzle."
"We believe that increasing the availability of geological data will increase our knowledge of environmental factors that affect human health and welfare," he added.
One aim will be to start to identify deep geological structures that might be used for the safe long-term storage of the main greenhouse gas carbon dioxide produced from burning fossil fuels to generate electricity.
Many scientists and politicians believe that Carbon Capture and Storage is one of the key tools in the battle against global warming.
But Jackson said OneGeology could also help spot potential problems before they flared into conflict given that geology was no respecter of national boundaries.
"If someone is extracting water from one side of a geological structure that crosses a political boundary while on the other side someone is polluting it, that is a problem," he said. "Knowing the structure crosses that border can pre-empt that."
The project, which was not even a proposal a year ago, is due to start producing results by mid-2008 and grow steadily from there as more countries start to pool data that they already hold and start to fill in the gaps.
One of the troubles is that while the data exists nationally, much is held in formats that are not compatible, so the project will convert the information into the new GeoSciML universal geological language.
"The need is to make the data available and to make it harmonious," said Jackson. "The biggest barrier to information is not its cost, it is knowing that it exists and where it is."
The project will start at a meeting in southern Britain's coastal resort of Brighton from March 12-16. Details can be found at www.onegeology.org.