Microsoft investing $50 million in AI climate-change program

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Microsoft announced recently that it would invest $50 million in a program that provides cloud-computing services and other resources to organizations working on climate change and environmental technology.

The Redmond company's AI for Earth program launched in July with $2 million, awarding grants to universities, companies and nongovernmental organizations that gave them free use of Microsoft's artificial-intelligence technology, including Azure cloud services and mapping tools.

Organizations that focus on agriculture, water, biodiversity and climate change are eligible for the grants, which aim to accelerate sustainability research.

"We believe that we need to, with a sense of urgency, address the climate issues for the planet," Microsoft President Brad Smith said. "If you look at the past 200 years, a series of industrial revolutions have radically improved the standards of living for human beings. But it's come at a cost for the planet."

Smith announced the $50 million investment, which is to be awarded over five years, at the One Climate Summit in Paris on Monday, which draws government officials and other leaders from around the world.

Microsoft is one of hundreds of U.S. companies that pledged to remain committed to reducing carbon emissions when President Donald Trump

announced the U.S. would pull out of the global Paris Climate Accord. The U.S. is now the only country in the world to reject the pact, after Syria announced last month it would sign the agreement.

Microsoft joined Amazon, Starbucks, Google and others in signing a letter earlier this year in support of the climate agreement and opposing the Trump administration's decision to withdraw.

AI for Earth has supported independent groups as well as those that include Microsoft, such as Project Premonition, which is working on early detection of pathogens that cause diseases. Microsoft partnered with several universities, including the University of Pittsburgh and Johns Hopkins University, to launch that project.

The $50 million investment will be used to provide technology and training to emerging companies, as well as resources to help companies bring products to market.

"The good news is that the world now has vast amounts of digital data about climate-related problems," Smith said. The challenge is that the data is not easy to search and understand, which is where Azure's artificial-intelligence technology comes in.

Microsoft also plans to partner with organizations to help them spin out sustainability products as quickly as possible.

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