

Landsat Plan Hits Stormy Weather

On 8 March, President Reagan announced his long-awaited decision to transfer the government's weather satellites and land remote sensing satellites (Landsat's) to the private sector—and generated an immediate tempest. The plan follows the recommendations made to him in January by the Cabinet Council on Commerce and Trade (*Science*, 11 February 1982, p. 752).

The land and weather satellites are currently being operated by the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which will also oversee the transfer. On the day of the announcement, 8 March, NOAA administrator John V. Byrne hastened to assure suspicious reporters that the U.S. Weather Service was *not* being dismantled, and that coastal cities would *not* have to start paying for hurricane warnings—consumer activist Ralph Nader's warnings notwithstanding. The government would simply buy the weather data from the satellite operator and continue its forecasts free.

Byrne was considerably more discomfited, however, when pressed to explain just why the President wanted to sell the weather satellites. He admitted that the federal weather service and the Pentagon would be virtually the only customers for the data, and indeed, that the government was likely to end up spending considerably more for the data than it pays now. But, loyally, he pointed to the Administration's faith in the private sector, and suggested the possibility of cost savings at some future date.

In fact, NOAA is being forced into this because of Landsat. In the Reagan Administration's first budget-slashing exercise in 1981, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) decreed that Landsat must be transferred to the private sector by 1988; it has held to that stance despite protests from the remote sensing community that a viable commercial market for Landsat is at least 10 years away. The weather satellites only entered the picture when the Communications Satellite Corporation (COMSAT) suggested a face-saving deal: COMSAT would buy Landsat and nurse the market, if the government would also sell it the weather satellites and promise to buy back enough data to cover Landsat's losses.

This is essentially the framework endorsed by Reagan, although it has been phrased in free-market language: NOAA will put the land and the weather systems up for competitive bid separately, or as a single system. Most observers consider COMSAT a shoo-in—no one else has expressed the slightest interest in the weather satellites—although Byrne did mention that one small venture, American Science & Technology of Bethesda, Maryland, has talked about bidding on Landsat alone. (Byrne was unable to say what would happen if none of the bids were financially acceptable, other than to express confidence that the Administration would then reconsider the idea.)

In any event, nothing will happen until NOAA gets legislative approval of the plan, which has already hit rough sledding in Congress. Members have been besieged with calls from worried farm groups, aviation groups, and others. "They blew it," says a hill staffer. "COMSAT and Commerce had no idea how strongly people feel that weather forecasting is a legitimate public function."

Indeed, hearings are starting soon on both sides of

Capitol Hill, and the Administration may have to come up with a better case than it has presented to date. "So far, we've seen no compelling evidence that the weather satellites should be commercialized," says Representative James H. Scheuer (D-N.Y.), head of the House subcommittee on natural resources.

The committees' prime concern is to make sure that weather reports do, in fact, continue to be free. But they will also want to know how the Administration plans to maintain the free international exchange of weather data in



John V. Byrne

Hard pressed to explain the advantages of selling the weather satellites.

a commercial setting, and how the Pentagon can be guaranteed priority access to the data in a crisis. Moreover, skeptics will question whether someone with a guaranteed monopoly on weather satellites will bother to advance the technology.

Landsat, while it has a lower profile politically, is an even tougher problem. For one thing, its users are frantic for someone to start building new satellites now; otherwise, they say, market development will be crippled by gaps in the data later in the decade. In announcing the President's decision, Byrne suggested that, given the likely delays in Congress and in the bidding process, construction on a new satellite might start before bidding is complete. He could not say, however, just who would pay for that initial construction. Certainly there is no money for it in Reagan's fiscal year 1984 budget.

More fundamental, however, is the fact that neither the weather satellites nor Landsat would have been an issue if the White House had not insisted that Landsat be commercialized so quickly. Congress may very well ask why Landsat should be commercialized at all.

Most of the system's utility does seem to lie in the public sector. (The Departments of Agriculture and Interior are by far the largest users.) Activities such as crop forecasting, land-use planning, or pollution monitoring seem analogous to accepted government services such as the mapping done by the U.S. Geological Survey—or for that matter, the weather forecasting done by NOAA. Many observers have suggested that the Landsat and weather systems be combined and left in NOAA. Data for private use, such as oil or mineral exploration, could be bought from the government at cost.

OMB has defined this option out of existence because it does not want to pay for new satellites. But it is not clear that the government would end up paying any less under the Reagan plan.—**M. MITCHELL WALDROP**