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## Landsat Threatened Again

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David Stockman, director of the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), has once again tried to halt the transfer of the government's Landsat system to a private operator.

On 20 March, he met with four Republican senators—Slade Gorton of Washington, John C. Danforth of Missouri, Paul Laxalt of Nevada, and Warren Rudman of New Hampshire—and asked their help in killing the transfer, which had been mandated last year by the Land Remote Sensing Commercialization Act of 1984. In a 5-page handout he detailed his reasons: after 13 years of remote sensing research and development, he said there is still no substantial market for Landsat imagery and little likelihood that the market will grow; therefore, transfer to a private operator would require federal subsidies on the order of \$100 million to \$300 million over the next decade, continuing indefinitely. In particular, said Stockman, the firm selected to operate Landsat by the Department of Commerce—a partnership of Hughes and RCA known as EOSAT—was putting essentially none of its own money at risk. So would one of the senators please delete the first-year funding for the transfer from the fiscal year 1986 budget, which is now being finalized?

The senators were reportedly swayed by Stockman's arguments but noncommittal. Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige, however, was sorely annoyed. Commerce and EOSAT have already gone a long way to meet Stockman's objections to the conditions of the Landsat transfer (*Science*, 12 October 1984, p. 152), Stockman and Baldrige are supposedly in the process of negotiating their last remaining differences, and yet Stockman went behind Baldrige's back with this.

EOSAT officials, meanwhile, are incensed. They maintain Stockman's 5-page handout was, to put it politely, misleading. For example, it fuzzes over the fact that almost every study ever made of Landsat has emphasized the need for a subsidy in the early years to help get the industry established; that President Reagan himself agreed to a subsidy last summer; that EOSAT has already agreed

to an absolute limit of \$286 million on the federal subsidy; and that EOSAT will spend \$75 million of its own money to build a market for Landsat.

Be that as it may, it now appears that Baldrige can only save the Landsat transfer if he takes his case directly to the President.

—M. MITCHELL WALDROP

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## NASA Plans Award to GE Despite Contract Ban

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Planning and design work on key portions of the \$8 billion space station being developed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) appears likely to proceed despite the government's ban on awarding contracts to General Electric (GE). NASA hopes to award a prime contract and major subcontract to the company on April 15. The work covers critical functions and operating systems in two of four design packages for the space station.

On 28 March the Department of Defense (DOD) suspended GE from its list of approved contractors after the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania handed down a 108-count indictment against the company. GE is charged with overbilling DOD \$800,000 for overtime work on Minuteman missile nose cones between March and November of 1980. As a result of DOD's action, all federal agencies are prohibited from signing new contracts with the company until the suspension is lifted. No termination date has been set at this time.

However, officials at Goddard Space Flight Center and the Lewis Research Center say they still are working toward signing a contract with GE on 15 April. Industry sources say that NASA administrator James M. Beggs has indicated that the agency will award the contracts to GE if it is feasible. Under federal acquisition regulations, NASA can sidestep the contract ban, but first the agency's general counsel and chief procurement officer must rule that "there are compelling circumstances." Officials at both Goddard and Lewis declined to state whether other contractors could be substituted quickly should the waiver not be granted.

General Electric was selected as a

prime contractor, along with RCA Astro Electronics of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to define engineering requirements and perform preliminary design work on the space station's free flying platforms. The \$10-million, 21-month contract titled "work package 3," also calls for the company to define requirements for conducting maintenance services on spacecraft, and setting design parameters for locating instrumentation and payloads on the space station.

In addition, GE is involved in "work package 4"—the design of a power generation, conditioning, and storage system. GE is the largest of seven subcontractors TRW has lined up to look at the feasibility of scaling up satellite nuclear power systems for the space station and at design of a solar thermal dynamic energy system. TRW and Rockwell International are scheduled to be awarded contracts worth up to \$6 million each for the design competition. TRW indicates its contract for work package 4 might be jeopardized if GE were disqualified.

—MARK CRAWFORD

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## Three Plans Proposed to Avert Vaccine Shortages

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In the past few weeks, federal legislators and the Administration have come forward with three different plans to limit claims against vaccine manufacturers arising from vaccine-related injuries. The plans differ significantly, but the common intent is to avert a potential shortage of vaccines against childhood diseases.

Senator Paula Hawkins (R-Fla.) on 2 April introduced a bill that represents a compromise between two key players in the issue—the American Academy of Pediatrics and a group of parents who say their children were harmed by vaccines. The legislation would establish a no-fault federal compensation program, while at the same time retain a victim's right to sue. The bill would limit damages and provide backup insurance to vaccine manufacturers.

The Administration last week said it would not support a federal compensation system, but is considering a plan limiting damages awarded for pain and emotional suffering. Its plan