
Landsat Threatened Again

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

NASA Plans Award to GE Despite Contract Ban

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

Three Plans Proposed to Avert Vaccine Shortages

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

would still allow victims to sue the manufacturers for medical expenses with no ceiling. Earlier in the month, Representative Edward Madigan (R-Ill.) introduced a bill drawn up by Lederle Laboratories that would set up a federal compensation program and provide manufacturers strong protection against liability claims.

Representative Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) in the meantime recently sent four dozen questions to vaccine manufacturers, asking details about their insurance and liability costs and set a 1 May deadline for response. A Waxman aide said that Madigan cosigned the letter and that the two legislators agreed to hold off on moving any legislation until they hear from the companies.—**MARJORIE SUN**

NASA, NOAA Make a Deal

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are close to settling a technical dispute over launch vehicles with a deal that could have major implications for both agencies in the 1990's.

In a meeting on 1 April, NOAA administrator Anthony Calio and NASA's deputy associate administrator for space science and applications, Samuel W. Keller, worked out a framework in which NOAA would use the space shuttle to launch its next three polar-orbiting weather satellites—known as NOAA K, L, and M—instead of using cheaper, refurbished Titan II ICBM's being offered by the Air Force. NASA, in return, would make up the roughly \$90 million price difference, much of which stems from modifications required in the NOAA spacecraft so that the satellites can be launched on the shuttle.

Coupled with NASA's recent agreement limiting the Air Force's own use of Titan launchers (*Science*, 22 March, p. 1445), the pact with NOAA would end a period of uncertainty for NASA. Agency officials have been deeply concerned that the loss of payloads would lower the shuttle flight rate in coming years, drive up the cost per flight, and make the shuttle less and less competitive with Europe's Ariane launcher. (*Science*, 24 August, 1984, p. 812).

In the long run, however, there is a much more important element to the NASA-NOAA agreement. NASA would officially commit itself to building an unmanned, polar-orbiting instrument platform as part of its space-station program—something that John McElroy, head of NOAA's satellite and information service, has eagerly been seeking—and NOAA would promise that this next batch of free-flying weather satellites will be its last: all subsequent weather instruments will be placed on the platform, where they can be serviced, repaired, and replaced by astronauts operating from the shuttle. Thus, NASA would be given its first firm requirement for a piece of the space station and its first firm customer.

—**M. MITCHELL WALDROP**

House Committee Questions SSC

Concerned about the potential for failure and cost overruns, the House Science and Technology Committee has put the Department of Energy (DOE) on notice that it will not support funding the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) until sufficient work has been done on the magnet system. In a report due out 16 April, the committee takes a stern approach toward the proposed project. It states that the \$20 million now being spent annually for research is inadequate to enable the project to begin construction in 1988 as many have hoped.

"The committee wants to emphasize . . . that the basic issue facing the SSC for the next several years is not when and where the SSC will be built, rather the issue is whether or not the SSC should be built," says the committee. Chairman Don Fuqua (D-Fla.) and committee members instructed DOE not to submit a formal project proposal until it can provide a detailed design of the SSC with full cost estimates; document the engineering feasibility; and produce a planning schedule covering magnet manufacturing, construction and start-up timetables.

Of prime concern to the science committee are the costs of the magnets. Fuqua and other members want to be assured not only that the techni-

cal challenges of manufacturing and performance can be achieved, but also that required cost reductions can be obtained. "It is apparent that neither the funding nor the time scale presently envisioned will be adequate . . .," says the committee, "to give confidence in the magnet system if the SSC is submitted in the fiscal year 1988 budget submission."

One committee aide observes that the Tevatron superconducting magnets at Fermilab cost \$50,000 each. At this level, the SSC's magnet system would cost more than \$5 billion. Revised estimates by DOE now put the cost of the accelerator at \$6 billion, assuming magnet costs could be sharply reduced and that construction can commence in 1988.

The science committee's objections to the current course of the SSC's development goes beyond magnets. It criticizes the program for the "lack of industrial and foreign participation" at this early stage.—**MARK CRAWFORD**

Disarmament Chain Letter Takes on Life of Its Own

In 1982, Yosiaki Ito, an entomology professor at Nagoya University, sent a letter to ten scientific colleagues in the West in an effort to drum up support from the scientific community for the United Nations' Second Special Session on Disarmament, which was scheduled to take place later that year. He asked his colleagues to write to ten other scientists expressing the need for nuclear disarmament. Thus was started a chain letter that seems to have taken on a life of its own.

According to Ito, as many as 70,000 scientists have now written letters, and the missives are still circulating in the scientific community more than 2 years after the disarmament meeting took place. Ito bases his estimate on the fact that many of those who have written to their colleagues have sent him a copy of their letters. By the end of last November, he had received more than 6000 copies from 86 countries. They include almost 1600 from the United States, 106 from the Soviet Union, and about 3000 from Western Europe. Ito is now wondering how to make use of this unexpectedly prolific letter writing.—**COLIN NORMAN**