
Satellite sale: Goodbye open skies?

If and when the government sells the nation's land satellite system (Landsat) or the Landsat and meteorological satellite systems (SN: 3/19/83, p. 181), the purchasers will not be required to allow universal access to data gathered by the satellites. The United States has followed an "open skies" policy for 25 years, guaranteeing that anyone from any country can purchase data at fair and uniform prices.

Plans for the sale are in motion — the final request for proposals is expected to be issued in mid-December; by mid-May, 1984, the Secretary of Commerce should have received the recommendations from his staff for selecting a single owner-operator for the system.

If the satellites are purchased by an operator from the private sector, the government will no longer be able to require that the policy be continued, though it would be "encouraged," says William Bishop of the Department of Commerce. Bishop works for the Civil Space Remote Sensing Source Evaluation Board, which was created to execute the transfer to the private sector of the civil land and meteorological satellites, and to arrange contracts by which the United States can continue to acquire the data it has been gathering for itself.

"While this board feels that [open skies] is the proper national policy, we didn't feel we had any right to demand that an operator do a particular thing," though the new owner would be required to check with the government before policy changes are made, Bishop says. A sale to the private sector would end governmental control over the satellite system, he says, but "the State Department has pretty strong levers on them if they do something that's not in the national interest."

However, "international interest" also is of wide concern. The Land Remote Sensing Advisory Committee convened by Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige has strongly and consistently recommended that any purchaser from the private sector be required to adhere to the open skies policy (SN: 11/2/82, p. 343). Too, there are clear signs that other nations may object if the policy is changed. In recent testimony before a House committee on government operations, J. Dexter Peach of the U.S. General Accounting Office described how representatives of 10 countries that use Landsat data responded to the potential sale. (In fiscal year 1982 foreign users bought 45 percent of the Landsat tapes and images sold by the U.S. Earth Resources Observation Systems Data Center in Sioux Falls, S.D.)

While officials of the countries were not opposed *per se* to the sale, all were concerned about possible changes, Peach said. Over the years the United States'

willingness to sell Landsat data to anyone on equal terms has allayed fears that the satellites will be used for surveillance within their boundaries. In light of the proposed sale, Peach says, "they were concerned that as sensors on board the satellites become more sophisticated, the satellites could be used to acquire and distribute military intelligence harmful to their national interests."

Peach also alluded to the nations' fears that their national privacy would be invaded, and that the transfer would have adverse effects on negotiations for sale of their agricultural products. Other worries are that a non-federal owner would cut off data broadcasts to foreign ground stations, such as the one Thailand built recently for \$10 million, and would impose sharp price increases that could limit their ability to buy the satellite data they use in identifying and managing resources.

—C. Simon

Watt succumbs to a rising tide

James Watt's most significant accomplishment during his two and a half controversial years as Department of Interior secretary in the Reagan cabinet may have been to increase public awareness of environmental issues. "He stimulated us to think about conservation," says William K. Reilly, president of The Conservation Foundation, a nonpartisan research organization based in Washington, D.C. Growing opposition to Watt's provocative policies favoring economic development of public natural resources showed the depth of public support for protecting the environment, Reilly noted following Watt's resignation earlier this week. President Reagan "reluctantly" accepted Watt's resignation.

Watt's decision came at a time when he was under increasing attack, even from Republicans in the Senate, where a resolution urging his resignation was likely to pass. Both the Senate and the House had already passed bills that would curb Watt's schemes to increase offshore oil and gas development.

In addition, Watt's now-infamous comment, "I have a black, I have a woman, two Jews and a cripple," describing the membership of a coal advisory committee, similar to previous unguarded statements about liberals, environmentalists, Indians, Jews and the Beach Boys, further embarrassed the Reagan administration.

Because Watt's policies had President Reagan's wholehearted approval and were well-supported within the Interior Department, most environmentalists foresee little change in the department's actions. The list of potential successors reflects views similar to those Watt expressed, although the new secretary will probably be more conciliatory.

—I. Peterson

Frost microbe tests delayed

Field trials of a genetically engineered bacterium, the first expected to be deliberately released outside the laboratory or greenhouse, have now been postponed at least until spring. The delay is in response to a lawsuit threatened by a critic of genetic engineering who says the test may not be safe to the environment. Scientists at the University of California at Berkeley had planned to apply, to a test plot of potatoes, bacteria genetically engineered to prevent them from serving as centers for ice formation, and thus from causing frost damage at light-frost temperatures (SN: 8/27/83, p. 132). Jeremy Rifkin, head of the Foundation on Economic Trends, threatened to seek a court restraining order against the field tests. He and several environmental groups previously filed a suit against the National Institutes of Health, which had approved the experiments (SN: 9/24/83, p. 198). According to a spokesman for the University of California, the tests were postponed because there was not adequate time left this fall to respond to the threatened legal action and to carry out the research before heavy frosts hit the test area. □

Satellites named

A satellite by any other name would still complete its orbit, but names they must have. The international astronomical community has delegated the power to select names to the Executive Committee of the International Astronomical Union (IAU). The IAU now reports that the Executive Committee has accepted names and permanent designations suggested jointly by the IAU's Commission 20 and its Working Group on Planetary System Nomenclature for three recently discovered satellites of Jupiter and one of Saturn. They are Jupiter XIV Thebe (originally listed as 1979 J2), Jupiter XV Adrastea (1979 J1), Jupiter XVI Metis (1979 J3) and Saturn XV Atlas (1980 S28).

The official choices are a confirmation of names already widely used. However, the decisions represent a reordering of the Jovian satellites: Adrastea was previously numbered Jupiter XIV, and Thebe was Jupiter XV. An IAU announcement underlines the change with a statement that the order of Jovian satellites previously used is in error.

The three Jovian satellites include the innermost known ones, Adrastea and Metis, which are nearly in the same orbit at a radius of 128,000 kilometers. Amalthea (Jupiter V) intervenes, and then comes Thebe at 221,000 km. All complete their orbits in less than one day. All three are small; Thebe, at 40 km across, is the largest. They are associated with Jupiter's rings and may be the sources of most of the rings' particles. □