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Draft Bill Would Broaden Role of Space Commercialization Office

MISSY FREDERICK, WASHINGTON

A remote sensing industry association is advocating legislation intended to lead to more government business for its companies, but the broad, encompassing nature of the bill, which is still in draft form, also has generated opposition.

The proposed legislation, known as the Imagery, Mapping and Geospatial Enhancement (IMAGE) Act of 2006, is expected to be sponsored by Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.), who sent letters to colleagues dated July 14 asking for them to co-sponsor the legislation. It has not yet been introduced.

The bill, an amendment to the Technology Administration Act of 1998, would give additional responsibilities to the Office of Space Commercialization, which has been part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) since 2005, though it was created in 1988.

The general purpose of the bill, according to its draft text, is to "promote the growth and advancement in U.S. space and airborne remote sensing technologies and value-added services."

Some of the ways the office can do this, according to the legislation, is work to avoid competition between the government and private firms, apply remote sensing technologies to a variety of operations and examine how remote sensing data currently is being used government wide.

John Byrd, government affairs manager for the Management Association for Private

Photogrammetric Surveyors (MAPPS), which supports the legislation, said the bill would give responsibility for implementing a number of existing federal policies related to remote sensing to one office.

"As far as we know, there is no agency tasked to implement these policies," Byrd said.

MAPPS represents a variety of remote sensing firms, among them a number of value-added technology firms, airborne data companies and the two major geospatial imagery firms, GeoEye of Dulles, Va., and DigitalGlobe of Longmont, Colo.

Some of the policies Byrd cited include the president's commercial remote sensing policy of 2003, which encourages the use of commercial imagery, and a June 2002 memo from George Tenet, then-director of the Central Intelligence Agency, which stressed that commercial satellite imagery be the "primary source of data" used for government mapping and other tasks.

But the bill's broad language is sparking some resistance, even before it is introduced.

Some of that resistance is coming from the Office of Space Commercialization itself.

Ed Morris, who was appointed the office's director in February, said in a telephone interview Aug. 3 that his office has some concerns with the legislation, particularly its references to airborne technologies.

Morris said the language also could encompass a variety of technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles, and that these things normally would not fall under the jurisdiction of his office.



Rep. Curt Weldon

"These areas are very big, and they're clearly not space related," Morris said. "I'm not saying there's not a need there, but our office needs to stay balanced."

Morris said the legislation includes some good components, such as having his office act as a bridge between government customers and industry providers, and an emphasis on creating a level playing field between government and commercial providers of imagery.

"If the bill was worked on, we

might be able to find some common ground, but right now it's just too broad and not really fitting into our charter when it includes non-space activities," Morris said.

Byrd said MAPPS did not want to see space imagery companies exclusively promoted and that a single, leading office is needed to promote remote sensing in general throughout government circles.

"We're an advocate for all commercial remote sensing firms and don't want to single

out one sector," Byrd said. "We're looking to open up as many markets as possible."

John Palatiello, executive director of MAPPS, said the organization has done research into the Office of Space Commercialization's history, and that it previously has been involved with airborne and value-added imagery.

"What we think is needed is a revisited and refocus on the broader ... remote sensing community," Palatiello said.

This is important, Palatiello said, because competition from government offices is a real problem for the industry. MAPPS recently fought the fact that Congress gave NOAA a \$12 million earmark in the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act (H.R. 4939) to build an aircraft with a suite of sensors that duplicates what can already be found in the commercial imagery.

"We fought that and we're still fighting that," Palatiello said. "Why NOAA needs a plane to capture the same imagery for its own use is beyond us."

Mark Brender, vice president for communications and marketing for GeoEye, a commercial provider of high-resolution satellite imagery, said the U.S. Office of Management and Budget has been developing an architecture for the entire U.S. government's use of Geographic Information Systems products.

Once that architecture is done, Brender said it might make sense to give some of the responsibilities now outlined in the IMAGE Act to another office. "The Office of Space Commercialization within the Department of Commerce should remain just that," he said.

Byrd said MAPPS had wanted to see the bill introduced during the first week of August, but that because of time constraints, it likely would not be introduced until after Congress' summer recess.

Sen. George Allen (R-Va.) plans to introduce companion legislation to the bill, according to Allen's press secretary, David Snapp, though Snapp could not confirm by press time when the bill would be introduced.

According to Snapp, Allen supports the bill because it promotes privatization of work that does not need to be done by government entities, and is a fit for the senator because there are many geospatial and remote sensing firms in his district.

Representatives of the House Science Committee, the Office of Management and Budget and Rep. Weldon's office who were contacted for comment on this article did not return those phone calls by press time.

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