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Ken Klotzbach/Argus Leader

Linda Statz of Sioux Falls watches Saturday as her daughter Megan, 11, points to features on a huge rotating globe in the atrium of the USGS EROS Data Center. The center was celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Thousands get rare glimpse of EROS as imaging center celebrates 25 years

By **BOB KEYES**
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EROS Data Center opened up its doors, unlocked its vaults and offered the public a peek inside its computers Saturday.

The center that surveys the Earth with satellite images hosted a 25th anniversary open house.

Going into Saturday's event, officials figured the public response would be strong, but they were overwhelmed with the crush of science-savvy curiosity-seekers.

Young and old, they began arriving at 8 a.m., an hour before the open house was supposed to begin, and stayed until after the 3 p.m. closing time.

"Take a beautiful Saturday afternoon - perhaps the last great day of the summer - and tour a federal agency.

Who's going to do that? And yet, we've got thousands of people out here who want to see not a bunch of bureaucrats, but to see how their tax dollars are being used," said a delighted Ron Beck, a technical information officer who has worked at Earth Resources Observation Systems for 24 years.

"We pitched this as an educational opportunity, and the people have said, 'Yeah, we'll do that.' ... People are obviously interested in what we are and what we do."

An open house two years ago to dedicate a new wing drew 5,400 people.

No official attendance figures were available Saturday, but some guessed as many as 10,000 visited the center northeast of Sioux Falls.

They had free rein to walk throughout the center, check

out hundreds of satellite images and learn about EROS' mission in the years ahead.

A volunteer army of 350 employees gave tours and answered questions.

In addition to the serious stuff, EROS brought in food vendors and musicians for a family fair out on the grass.

Operated by the U.S. Geological Survey, the center houses the world's largest collection of civilian satellite images and aerial photographs of the Earth.

Visitors learned how EROS uses those images to study the changing planet and how it will monitor changes in the future.

Those images are vital to business and government. Oil companies and agribusiness tap EROS' resources for strategic information, while governments use the images

to monitor floods and famine.

"This is wonderful," said Sue Vetch of Sioux Falls, who brought her 2½-year-old daughter to the open house. "It's an interesting place, and it's neat to see what they actually do out here."

Robert Steib and Jo Sandberg, also of Sioux Falls, agreed.

They arrived for the 1 p.m. address by former space shuttle astronaut Mary Cleave, then walked around the building.

"It's nice that we get a chance to look around the facility," said Steib, who added his praise to a public-comment board, writing in big, bold letters: "Wonderful!"

Other comments: "It was awesome." "Thanks. Wow." "Great eye-opener." "The clown was neat."