

TIM JOHNSON
SOUTH DAKOTA

RAPID CITY OFFICE: (605) 341-3880
PO BOX 1098, RAPID CITY, SD 57709

ABERDEEN OFFICE: (605) 226-3440
PO BOX 1554, ABERDEEN, SD 57402

SIOUX FALLS OFFICE: (605) 332-8896
PO BOX 1424, SIOUX FALLS, SD 57101

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4104

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
136 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4104
(202) 224-5842

TDD: (202) 224-8279

TOLL FREE
1-800-537-0025

E-MAIL: tim@johnson.senate.gov
WEB SITE: <http://johnson.senate.gov>

January 21, 2005

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing to request your assistance in strengthening our nation's Landsat program. Remote sensing data obtained through Landsat is a valuable resource and is utilized by numerous federal departments and agencies, as well as a growing number of commercial interests.

The Landsat program has collected and distributed a 33-year continuous record of the land surfaces of the world. The program has become so successful that a significant portion of the program's budget is recovered through outside data sales. On May 31, 2003, a malfunction developed on board the Landsat 7 satellite that has prevented the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) from collecting clear image data from the satellite. Unfortunately, all efforts to restore operability of the satellite failed. The current situation has highlighted many concerns that I believe deserve your consideration.

Among the most glaring issues that arose from this situation was the lack of clear and identifiable organizational leadership relating to remote sensing policy. Due to the significant overlap of responsibility for the Landsat program and the diverse number of federal entities that utilize the program, a significant amount of confusion and delay emerged in developing a comprehensive strategy to address the problem. I have spoken with Secretary Norton about this concern and am encouraged that the Department of Interior has recognized this deficiency and has acknowledged an intent to demonstrate greater leadership for remote sensing policy. As the USGS is the recipient of the Landsat data and serves to enhance and distribute the products derived from the data, the USGS is uniquely positioned to evaluate the potential applications that may best serve the federal government and expand opportunities for commercial use. I hope that the Administration at all levels will support the USGS and collaborate to strengthen the Landsat mission.

The degradation of the Landsat imagery also presented immediate budgetary concerns for USGS and the Earth Resources Observation and Science (EROS) Data Center. The Landsat program became so successful that a significant portion of the EROS annual budget is recovered through outside data sales. Those sales dropped dramatically because of the imagery imperfections and jeopardized the viability of this valuable facility.

I am pleased that, with the assistance of the Department of Interior and bipartisan support in Congress, adequate funds were reprogrammed in Fiscal Year 2003 and FY 2004 to sustain data collection, archiving, and distribution capabilities. The Omnibus Appropriations legislation for FY 2005 directs the Department of Interior to use existing cost savings within the department to maintain operations at EROS in the coming year. I hope that the Administration will make these resources available without complication, and will also include adequate funding for EROS in the FY 2006 budget proposal.

The President
January 19, 2005
Page two

There is widespread support to maintain our nation's commitment to remote sensing data collection and distribution. The technical capabilities at EROS have been instrumental in developing innovative approaches to enhance the Landsat data we continue to receive, and in producing useful products that seek to eliminate the gaps in imagery and improve potential data sales. It is imperative that we preserve the technical expertise and capabilities at EROS to maximize the usefulness of this data, and to ensure the successful development, deployment, and operations for a next generation Landsat mission.

The final issue I wish to address is the matter of a replacement system to restore the full capabilities and usefulness of our Landsat program. It is my understanding the Office of Science and Technology Policy is currently reviewing options to deploy a new data collection vehicle. There appear to be two primary options being evaluated. The first would allow NASA to contract for a gap mission to deploy a replacement satellite. The other option proposes to develop new sensor technologies that would be attached to the NOAA National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS).

I strongly encourage the Administration to favorably consider deploying a gap-mission to restore the Landsat program at the earliest possible opportunity. I am deeply concerned that NPOESS already faces delays and budgetary overruns. Adding Landsat features to this system may exacerbate these delays and cost concerns to the detriment of each mission. While I have great confidence in our technical and engineering capabilities, the malfunction aboard the current Landsat satellite highlights how vulnerable these systems are to a potential failure. Reconfiguring the design of NPOESS to accommodate Landsat hardware may complicate the sophisticated requirements of achieving success and may ultimately contribute to another system failure. Concerns have also been raised by Landsat customers that the altitude of the NPOESS satellite will significantly alter the scope of Landsat data and the effective continuity with the existing 33 year archives. I hope that the Administration will conclude that deploying a gap mission will best serve the nation's commitment to preserve the Landsat program.

Thank you for your consideration and cooperation with these important matters. If I may be of any assistance to you, please do not hesitate to contact me, or have you staff contact Dean Meinen in my Washington, D.C. office.

Sincerely,



Tim Johnson
United States Senate

TPJ/dm