

Remote sensing satellites

Landsat at centre of storm

Washington

THE Reagan Administration's plan to include the government's weather satellites in a possible sale of the Landsat remote sensing satellites to private business has run into trouble on Capitol Hill. Two panels of the House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology last week launched hearings on the proposal and expressed "serious concern" about how the decision had been taken.

Representative James Scheuer, the New York Democrat who is chairman of the hearings, said the decision to include the weather satellites to make the purchase of the Landsat system more alluring appeared to have been taken despite a series of government studies concluding that the weather satellites should not be turned over to the private sector. In April 1982 the same conclusion was endorsed by the cabinet council on commerce and trade.

"Eight months later, that decision was apparently reversed, even though neither the cabinet council nor any of its work groups had met in the interval. In fact, if one examines the advice which the administration received in the interval, it is almost inconceivable to me that the decision could have been reversed", he commented.

Committee investigators trying to reconstruct the steps leading up to the decision to include the weather satellites in a sale have discovered that one potential buyer, Comsat Corporation, was allowed to take part in executive branch discussions of the issue, to which neither Congress nor other interested companies were invited. And Mr Malcolm Baldrige, the Secretary of Commerce, revealed during last week's hearings that his deputy secretary, Mr Guy Fiske, and several assistants had been taken off the Landsat negotiations after Comsat offered a job to Fiske while talks with the department were still in progress.

Disclosure of the close ties between the commerce department and Comsat makes it unlikely that Mr Baldrige will be able to press ahead rapidly with a search for potential Landsat and weather satellite buyers. Testifying for the first time since President Reagan announced the controversial proposal last month, the commerce secretary insisted that only by putting the Landsat system in the hands of a competent company with marketing expertise could the United States beat off competition from foreign countries seeking customers for data produced by their own satellites.

France would be launching the first in a series of four land sensing satellites next year, Mr Baldrige said. Japan, Canada, Germany, the European Space Agency, India and the Soviet Union are also planning remote sensing programmes. "It would be ironic if these countries, building on the skills developed in the United States,

established the kind of market that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) can't and turned us into a net importer of satellite data products and services", he said.

But even Mr Baldrige had to admit that an acceptable buyer for Landsat might not turn up, because of all the military and diplomatic strings which the government would have to attach to a sale. Diplomatically, the United States would have to ensure that the proprietary claims of an owner would not undermine the "open skies" policy which made Landsat data available to the many foreign countries which depend on it for vital agricultural information.

The military strings would have to be knotted even tighter. The Department of Defense, in interagency talks on the sale, is insisting that some way be found to return the satellites to government control in an emergency. More difficult still, it wants to be able to screen new sensors attached to the satellites to ensure that they cannot detect information the Pentagon wants to keep secret.

According to Mr Baldrige, the only way to discover whether private companies could meet these conditions is to write them into a specification for bids and test the market. Members of the science committee, having learned that Comsat officials have met defence department experts to examine the military problems, have questioned whether a request for bids will give all companies an equal chance.

The administration argues that many organizations use Landsat data — mineral and energy companies, hydrologists, timber companies, fibre and food crop interests — but that NOAA is not able to exploit this potentially lucrative market as efficiently as a private company.

Many scientists, including officials within NOAA, believe that selling Landsat now would be premature since most of its custom comes from the federal government and it is likely to be six to ten years before the satellites could break even as a commercial venture. The administration concedes that buying Landsat might not appeal to the private sector unless the deal was sweetened by the inclusion of the weather satellites and a guarantee that the government would purchase the data the systems produced.

Representative Scheuer has made no secret of his view. He told Mr Baldrige last week that he agreed on the importance of an initiative to maintain the United States' dwindling technological lead in the satellite area. But he added: "I do not agree, nor do any of the experts who have looked at this problem, that we should sell a weather satellite system that is working well in order to cross-subsidize our land remote sensing capability".

Peter David

US space policy

Still behind closed doors?

Washington

DISCONTENT with US machinery for making policy on space has now provoked some in Congress to try to steal the initiative from the administration. Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina, the latest presidential hopeful to join the race for the Democratic nomination, has introduced a bill calling for the creation of a national space commission to overhaul space policy-making and wrest a degree of control from the National Security Council.

Introducing the bill last month, Senator Hollings said that the important decisions on space now took place behind closed doors and were dominated by the president's Space Interagency Group (SIG), an arm of the National Security Council.

The bill, the National Commission on Space Act, would set up a panel of 15 presidential nominees drawn from government, science and the private sector with a one-year mandate to review military and civilian space programmes and recommend legislative changes. It would be empowered to scrutinize government agencies, call hearings and conduct its own studies.

Supporters of the Hollings bill are taking as their text a report on civilian space policy prepared last year by the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) in response to a request by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, on which Senator Hollings is the ranking Democrat. The report contained harsh criticisms of existing policies, saying that institutions and principles underlying the American space effort have scarcely changed since the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958.

According to OTA, some kind of multi-representative forum is urgently needed to answer the big questions facing space policy: whether the United States is committed to exploring space; how it can become a reliable partner in international ventures; the role of government and private industry and whether the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) should continue to operate the shuttle once it has completed research and development.

OTA has also strongly criticized the composition of the Space Interagency Group under the Reagan Administration. Dr John Gibbons, OTA's director, has told Congress that by cutting out the private sector and excluding agencies such as the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior and the National Science Foundation, SIG had given "unambiguous control" over policy decisions to the military/intelligence community.

OTA's offensive against the present management of space policy is, however,