

*Remote Sensing and the Private Sector:  
Issues for Discussion*

March 1984

NTIS order #PB84-180777

**REMOTE SENSING AND  
THE PRIVATE SECTOR  
ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION**

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**A TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM**

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MARCH 1984

Recommended Citation:

*Remote Sensing and the Private Sector: Issues for Discussion—A Technical Memorandum*  
(Washington, D. C.: U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, OTA-TM-ISC-20,  
March 1984).

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 84-601019

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents  
U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402

# Preface

In March 1983, the administration proposed to transfer the meteorological and land remote-sensing (Landsat) satellite systems to private ownership. This proposal has raised a variety of issues, including concern over the small size of the market for remote-sensing data, the public good aspects of remote sensing, and use of the data to further foreign policy objectives.

In November 1983, Congress resolved one of the issues by deciding that the meteorological remote-sensing systems should not be privately owned; the Government will continue to operate them in the public interest. However, the Landsat system is still under active consideration by the Congress for transfer to private ownership, and Congress is now considering legislation designed to make such a transfer as smooth as possible.

U.S. systems have demonstrated to a variety of users, in the United States and abroad, that land remote sensing from space can be a powerful tool for mapping, assessing, and managing land resources. It may eventually be possible to establish a self-sustaining business selling data from a privately owned and operated land remote-sensing system to Government, private, and foreign customers. However, as the debate over whether and how to transfer the Landsat system has shown, the process of transferring Government-developed technological systems to the private sector is difficult and involves a wide variety of agencies and institutions, each with a different view of the appropriate means of transfer.

This technical memorandum, which was requested by the House Science and Technology Committee and the House Government Operations Committee, is designed to help Congress determine the appropriate requirements and conditions for private sector ownership of the U.S. land remote-sensing system. It also provides information and analysis that will be useful for Congress as it considers transfer legislation. This technical memorandum constitutes a portion of a major assessment of international cooperation and competition in civilian space activities that was requested by the House Science and Technology Committee and the Joint Economic Committee.

In undertaking this study, OTA sought the contributions of several Government agencies and a wide spectrum of knowledgeable and interested individuals. More than 50 persons contributed to this technical memorandum, either to provide data or to review early drafts. OTA gratefully acknowledges their help. We are particularly grateful to our workshop participants. Finally, OTA appreciates the assistance it received from the Congressional Research Service, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, and especially from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.



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OTA appreciates the help and advice of these workshop participants. OTA assumes full responsibility for its report, which does not necessarily represent the views of individual members of these workshops.