

An Idea That Worked...

On September 21, 1966, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall issued a press statement stating his belief that “the time is now right and urgent to apply space technology towards the solution of many pressing natural resources problems being compounded by population and industrial growth.”

During his time as Secretary, and through research for his environmental classic, *The Quiet Crisis*, Udall focused on finding new tools through which people could observe and study environmental changes and impacts on Planet Earth. Further, Udall understood that the Department of Interior’s own US Geological Survey had the scientific expertise and the mission to tackle the challenges.

On that day, forty years ago, Secretary Udall announced the beginning of Project EROS, a revolutionary program aimed at gathering facts about the natural resources of our planet from earth-orbiting satellites carrying sophisticated remote sensing observation instruments. Over the course of the next several years, that announcement stimulated a partnership between the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Department of the Interior that resulted in the 1972 launch of the first Earth Resources Technology Satellite, eventually dubbed “Landsat”.

This summer, USGS staff, at the Secretary’s invitation, visited his home in New Mexico. Udall and the USGS staff discussed the genesis of Project EROS, the ways in which earth imaging science has helped to meet the challenges defined in *The Quiet Crisis*, and the future of land imaging technology. Fortunately for us all, the discussions were captured on video.

The observation of the fortieth anniversary of this program comes at an especially fitting time. Today, we are poised on the threshold of an exciting new period of land imaging. On August 14, 2004, Dr. John Marburger III, director of the White House Office of Science Technology and Policy issued a memorandum outlining Landsat Data Continuity Strategy. The memorandum recognized Landsat as a national asset and recommended



transitioning Landsat to a sustained operational program.

On December 23, 2005, Dr. Marburger authorized the construction of a new Landsat “free-flyer” satellite. In addition, the memo states that the National Science and Technology Council, in coordination with NASA, the Department of Interior and USGS will lead an effort to develop a long-term plan for operational land imaging.

And, on May 6, 2006, in a letter to Dr. Marburger, the Department of the Interior stated: “The Department stands ready to accept the challenge of this new

century and assume leadership for the Nation’s civilian operational land imaging program, underscoring our commitment to stewardship and science in service to the Nation.”

The stage is now set for the new generation of land imaging satellites and a new focus on studying the earth from space. Secretary Udall’s stature as an elder statesman for conservation, environmentalism and the protection of wild lands makes his statements on the past and the future of land imaging technology especially vivid. The interview conducted by the USGS gives us the opportunity to tell the USGS EROS story in a new way.

We are in the process of creating several video presentations which focus on land imaging and remote sensing science. A goal is to tell the story for all to understand and appreciate. We want the general public to understand the societal relevance of the USGS, the EROS Project, and the future of land imaging. Udall’s message from 1966 has never been more timely or poignant—monitoring our planet’s environment from space is a key to a better future.

The video presentations will acknowledge the roots of land imaging for resource management and USGS participation in meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing environment in the 1960s. Through the lens of history, the videos will provide a sense of America’s long-term commitment to conservation, illustrate the depth of the USGS EROS archive and supply an historic anchor for Project EROS during the excitement of the US race to the moon.

September 21, 2006 marked the 40th anniversary of “Project EROS” or the beginning of Earth Observation of our land resources. While the USGS and AmericaView Inc. are recognizing the genesis of Earth Observation through an education and awareness effort (see www.americaview.org), a date will be forthcoming when we will gather to formally celebrate the contributions of Secretary Stewart Udall here at EROS.