

Testimony of John M. Palatiello
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Before the
Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census
of the
Committee on Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Hearing on
“Geospatial Information: Are we headed in the right direction or are we lost?”
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Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, I'm John Palatiello, Executive Director of the Management Association for Private Photogrammetric Surveyors (MAPPS) the nation's oldest and largest national association of private sector firms in the mapping, spatial data and geographic information systems field. The more than 170 member firms of MAPPS are engaged in mapping, photogrammetry, satellite and airborne remote sensing, aerial photography, hydrography, aerial and satellite image processing, GPS and GIS data collection, integration and conversion services.

We appreciate this opportunity to testify today on the Federal Government's geospatial information activities. As you will recall, our President, Mr. Mike Ritchie, testified before the Subcommittee in June of last year. At that time, MAPPS pointed to several areas where improvement is needed in the Federal Government's geospatial activities in order for the citizens of our Nation to receive the full benefit that geospatial technologies has to offer. My testimony today will focus on areas in which improvement has been made in the past year, as well as areas where further action is needed.

In his testimony last year, Mr. Ritchie said Geospatial One-Stop was akin to a cable television system that only carried PBS or a card catalogue in a library that only carried GPO publications. We indicated that in order for Geospatial One-Stop to become the true one-stop shopping portal for geospatial data, it must include private data, as well as government data. We are pleased that steps have been taken to ingest private data in Geospatial One-stop and data one can find metadata on several of our members' holdings. We commend Geospatial One Stop, and Mr. Cameron in particular, for bringing this about. However, a much more aggressive outreach program must be implemented so that the entire assets resident among commercial data providers is accessible via Geospatial One Stop.

One of the shortcomings of both the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC) and Geospatial One Stop (GOS) is their limited structure and participation. FGDC only includes Federal agencies. Neither state and local government nor the private sector has seats at the table. The GOS Board includes state and local government representatives, but not the private sector. Broader participation by private sector interests in setting policy and strategy for FGDC and GOS will result in a stronger offering that better represents the interests of the American public and American business, and will engage all stakeholders.

Under the current structure, for Federal agencies the FGDC and GOS processes are essentially voluntary and secondary. Agencies are focused on their own missions, not a broader national strategy. Coordination, data sharing, interoperability and duplication-avoidance are secondary to meeting the agency's own program needs. They are after-thoughts or low priority items. For all agency employees, other than the very small staffs at FGDC and GOS, these goals are no one's full time responsibilities. There is neither a carrot nor a stick to incentivize or mandate conformance. A change in the charter and implementation of FGDC in particular must provide either incentives or penalties to assure compliance.

Delegating responsibility for implementation of these coordinating mechanisms to entities within the Department of the Interior is not the most effective model. The widespread perception is that these are Interior or USGS activities, not OMB activities affecting all Federal agencies. We believe a stronger OMB role must be established to make coordination, inter-operability, duplication-avoidance and data-sharing a reality.

Prior to the promulgation of the first version of OMB Circular A-16 in 1953, the old Bureau of the Budget had a much stronger role in coordinating Federal geographic information activities. Executive Order 3206, issued on December 30, 1919, established the Board of Surveys and Maps of the Federal Government to coordinate and promote improved surveying and mapping activities by Federal agencies. It was a Bureau of the Budget entity. Its name was changed to the Federal Board of Surveys and Maps by Executive Order 7262 on January 4, 1936. Under that authority, in 1941, the Bureau of the Budget issued the "United States National Map Accuracy Standards," which applied to all Federal agencies that produce maps. The standards were revised several times, and the current version was issued in 1947. They are still used today. The Board was abolished by Executive Order 9094, on March 10, 1942 and functions were transferred to the Bureau of the Budget. An office in the Bureau of the Budget coordinated Federal geographic information activities. Those responsibilities were devolved to voluntary coordination activities of the agencies when Circular A-16 was issued in 1953. We believe the reestablishment of an OMB office should be considered by OMB and the committee.

Geospatial One Stop is a component of the E-Government initiative in the President's Management Agenda. It should be noted that another key component of the same Agenda is an initiative on Competitive Sourcing. Since 1955, it has been the policy of the U.S. Government that it will not start or carry on any commercial activity to provide a service or product for its own use if such product or service can be procured from private enterprise through ordinary business channels. The President's Competitive Sourcing initiative is designed to implement the aforementioned policy through OMB Circular A-76 and in accordance with the Federal Activities Inventory Reform (FAIR) Act, Public Law 105-270.

Mr. Chairman, we would like to reiterate that GOS is a welcome and necessary first step in better organizing, managing and carrying out the federal Government's geospatial activities. We commend the Bush Administration for this initiative. However, it is only a first step. Bold, decisive action is needed to eliminate the extraordinary waste, duplication and inefficiency in the Federal government's geospatial activities, the lack of a strong partnership in Federal agencies' relationship with State and local government, and the insidious extent to which there continues to be unfair government competition with the private sector.

Efforts by the Bush Administration to revise OMB Circular A-16 and create Geospatial One-Stop, the Clinton Administration's restructuring of the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC) and creation of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI), and the enforcement of OMB Circular A-16 all have one thing in common: they attempted to treat the symptoms, rather than the disease.

There are dozens of Federal agencies engaged in geospatial activities. Neither the agencies, nor OMB, have a comprehensive understanding of what agencies are involved in geospatial activities. No one in the Federal government has a current, accurate accounting of the annual geospatial expenditures. It is virtually impossible to determine how many Federal employees are involved in these activities. There is no balance sheet, performed to accepted cost accounting standards, of the capital investment made in equipment and plant (office space, etc.). There is no accurate data base on the amount of geospatial work performed in-house and by contract.

The relationship of each agency with other Federal agencies and with State, local and foreign government agencies, needs improvement. There is considerable duplication and redundancy, little sharing of data, and development of standards for "interoperability" of data has been far too slow. Even in the post 9/11 homeland security environment, turf battles among agencies are breaking out. No agency has any official status of "lead agency" on homeland security geospatial activities and the Department of Homeland Security is still too young to be an effective player, let alone leader.

There are far too many Federal agencies operating geospatial production capabilities that are expensive, inefficient, and which duplicate and compete with the private sector. There is in the geospatial structure, no uniform application of the federal policy that the government will not compete with the private sector. There is no accurate record of the extent to which the Federal government utilizes (or duplicates or competes with) the private sector (including the dollar amount and percentage contracted to the private sector and whether than has increased in the recent past and can increase in the future). Although mapping-related activities are consider "commercial" in nature, agency compliance with the FAIR Act, Office of Management Budget Circular A-76 and Executive Order 12615 has been minimal. The relevant provisions of the Economy Act and the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act, intended to prevent unfair government

competition with the private sector, are routinely ignored. There is no cross reference to these policies in NSDI, A-16, FGDC, GOS or Executive Order 12906.

Federal agencies provide grants or other Federal financial assistance to non-Federal entities (including but not limited to State, local and foreign government) to perform surveying and mapping activities. Many of these activities could be performed by the private sector. Moreover, Federal agencies provide grants and other Federal financial assistance to universities to perform surveying and mapping activities or research. In fact, these activities could be performed by the private sector and the “research” is on activities already commercially available. Much of this expenditure is outside the GOS, FGDC and A-16 structure.

With the advent of new airborne and space-based remote sensing and imaging technologies, there are new business models under which government agencies can now buy licenses to commercial off the shelf maps and images, rather than the government owning data. However, civilian Federal agencies are very slow to embrace this concept. We are encouraged by recent developments, including the “Tenet memo” and last year’s White House Policy on Commercial Remote Sensing, and we are confident they can help stimulate new thinking and new ways of doing business in the government, as well as a new paradigm for government utilization of the private sector. We would urge the Subcommittee to undertake a review of OMB Circular A-130 to review government information policy generally and its impact on geospatial data in particular.

Surveying, mapping and related geographic information can play a critical role in government at all levels in homeland security, for emergency preparedness, critical infrastructure inventory, and emergency response. There is serious question as to whether the post 9/11 period has enhanced agency coordination or caused a proliferation of effort. Many States and local government units of government need current, accurate maps and geographic information for homeland security applications, but the Federal government is not efficiently assisting, due to the lack of coordination and leadership in the government, and turf battles among agencies are emerging. The Department of Homeland Security Act failed to address this issue. MAPPS strongly supports H.R. 3367 by Rep. Sessions and S. 1230 by Senator Allard to create a statutory geospatial program in DHS.

Mr. Chairman, the title of this hearing is: “Geospatial Information: Are we headed in the right direction or are we lost?” The short answer is we are not proceeding with a good map. Numerous studies have been conducted which detail the lack of coordination of Federal mapping and geospatial activities, and the government’s duplication of and competition with the private sector. These studies date back to the 1930s. The time for action is long overdue. We hope this hearing will help stimulate that action. We commend you for your interest and leadership and we stand ready to work with Congress and the Executive Branch to better serve the geospatial needs of the American people in economic development, resource management, environmental protection, infrastructure, construction and maintenance and homeland security.