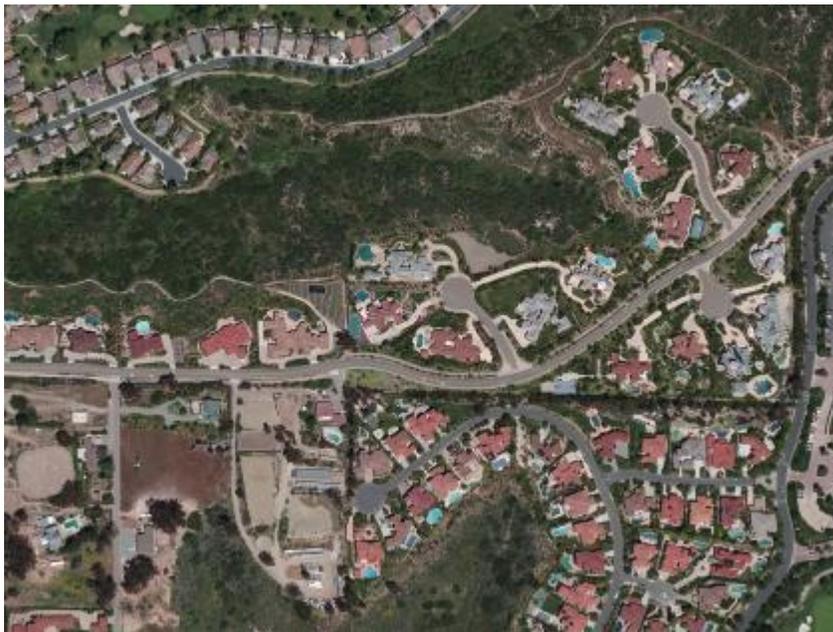


Satellite Imagery Firms in U.S. and Europe Pushing for Permission To Sell Sharper Imagery

By [Peter B. de Selding](#) | Sep. 16, 2013



Google's geospatial technologist said the company's "sweet spot" for mapping purposes was imagery with a 30-centimeter resolution. Shown is a DigitalGlobe aerial image of San Diego. Credit: DigitalGlobe photo

PARIS — Commercial geospatial-imagery companies on both sides of the Atlantic are urging their governments to ease restrictions on the sharpness of satellite imagery that can be sold on the market, saying the regulations no longer correspond to the state of the technology.

These officials' case was bolstered by a statement by Google's geospatial technologist who said the company's "sweet spot" for mapping purposes was imagery with a 30-centimeter resolution, meaning it can detect objects of that diameter.

Current policy in the United States and in France, the nations with the most active industries producing optical satellite Earth observation imagery, sets 50 centimeters as the limit for the open sale of satellite data.

Attending the World Satellite Business Week conference here organized by Euroconsult, Google Geospatial Technologist Ed Parsons made a presentation Sept. 12 on how the company views the future of location-based services that was shot through with aerial imagery at 30-centimeter resolution.

Google is also a major purchaser of commercial satellite imagery. Astrium Services, which is one of Europe's two major providers of commercial satellite imagery, announced Sept. 12 that it had contracted with Google to sell images of 70 centimeters' ground resolution from the two French Pleiades satellites, and 1.5 meters from the Spot 6 and Spot 7 satellites.

Earlier in the week at the same conference, Thales Alenia Space Chief Executive Jean-Loic Galle said his company, which builds high-resolution optical satellite sensors, has begun pressing the French government to ease the 50-meter restriction and has been met with a favorable initial reaction. See story, page 11.

DigitalGlobe of Longmont, Colo., has asked the U.S. Commerce Department for a similar policy change.

Jeffrey R. Tarr, DigitalGlobe's chief executive, said here Sept. 12 that aerial-image providers worldwide are already selling imagery at 30-centimeter resolution "over the vast majority of the globe." Allowing satellite imagery providers to compete with these companies, Tarr said, would stimulate competition and innovation, and protect the U.S. industrial base.

The opposing view, which no one at the conference expressed but which has buttressed the current 50-centimeter limit, is that aerial-imagery companies act locally and must abide by the laws of their nations on territorial overflight. Satellites operate outside of national boundaries and have global reach.

Tarr said he did not know how long the U.S. government would take before deciding the issue.

Marcello Maranesi, chief executive of e-Geos, the geospatial imagery arm of Telespazio of Italy — owned by the same Franco-Italian group as Thales Alenia Space — said aerial-image companies are selling pictures of urban areas with a 7-centimeter ground resolution.

All the current regulations are doing, Maranesi said, is favoring one collection technique over another.

"Thirty centimeters is better than 50, but 20 is better than 30 and 10 is better than 20," Maranesi said.

Military customers, who make up a large percentage of the revenue generated by high-resolution commercial imagery sales, are among the customers looking to an easing of the restrictions.

Col. Peter L.J. Loukes, director for intelligence support at the Dutch Defense Intelligence and Security Service, part of the Dutch Defense Ministry, said his service hopes that the 50-centimeter ceiling would be breached somewhere.

“And if other companies are offering this, I don’t think the U.S. will stay behind for long,” Loukes said, arguing that his government prefers a competitive market with suppliers from more than one nation.