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Satellite Firms Should See Growth As Need For Imagery Mounts, Official Says

By Geoff Fein

Even with the concern over dwindling defense budgets and the high cost of putting satellites into orbit, the director of the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) sees the commercial imagery sector growing domestically and internationally.

"I characterize that as a good news story," Vice Adm. Robert Murrett, director of NGA, told *Defense Daily* recently. "I think it is a question of how strong the growth will be in the satellite sectors."

Murrett said the government has seen tremendous growth, domestically and internationally, for the past five to 10 years. He's very optimistic there will be additional capacity domestically with firms like DigitalGlobe and GeoEye. "We look forward to being part of that."

Internationally, the commercial capacity coming from countries like Canada with RADARSAT-2, Germany with TerraSAR-X and TanDem-X and Italy with Cosmos Skymed are very encouraging, Murrett added.

"I don't think there is any question [the domestic and international imagery capability] is going to continue to grow," Murrett said. "It's just a question of how strong that growth will be."

The commercial remote sensing industry will continue to be an absolutely vital segment of NGA's overall collection capability, he added. "And I don't see any of that changing."

Exactly what that market is going to look like--its size, shape, and form--and the linkages NGA has to both domestic and international vendors, might create some back and forth, Murrett said.

"None of that would take away from the fact that this is an absolutely essential part of our overall collection posture and will be for about as far out as I can see," he added.

Murrett is coming to the end of his tenure as director of NGA. He will transition to a new post sometime this year and will be succeeded at NGA by Letitia Long, currently deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

During his four years at NGA's helm, Murrett has overseen increases in commercial imagery capacity as well as the launch of DigitalGlobe's World-View-1, launched in September 2007, and GeoEye's GeoEye-1 satellite launched in September 2008.

He said there are a couple of ways to measure the progress of the commercial imagery sector.

One way is to look at the contractual arrangements NGA has going forward for NextView.

The other way to measure the advances in commercial imagery is to look at the increased capacity, he said.

"Certainly World-View-1 and World-View-2 and GeoEye-1, from the domestic standpoint, represents significant additional capacity," Murrett said. "That has happened in just the last couple of years. It's certainly a big step up from IKONOS and QuickBird...a significant step forward from where we were just as recently as a few years ago...a huge amount of additional commercial capacity."

And the international contribution is growing dramatically in Europe and Asia, he added.

Overall, Murrett said he expects to see commercial imagery continue to grow because of the flexibility of imagery--the ease of handling unclassified data, which is a huge advantage for NGA based on the mission sets it has today.

Murrett also sees growth for airborne image collection as well.

Besides the ability to deploy airborne assets to collect imagery over what Murrett called benign areas--essentially western countries that have no concern about airborne mapping and geospatial mission support, airborne collection will also thrive because of cutting-edge sensor technology development.

"Many of them are unclassified to include hyperspectral and LIDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) and infrared to some degree. We are able to do a lot of good development of those types of sensors," he said. "With airborne platforms, I think that will be an area of the airborne suite that will continue to have a future."

The growth in capacity is also making it easier for NGA to keep up with the increased demand from combatant commanders, the intelligence community and others for imagery, Murrett noted.

The additional capacity gained with the launch of World-View-1 and World-View-2 (launched October 2009) and with GeoEye-1, along with some of the legacy platforms in the commercial sector, eventually made it easier for NGA to keep up with the demand, he said.

"At the same time, we did some [proactive things] last winter to purchase additional foreign remote sensing data. Incorporating that as well is important," Murrett said.

Murrett said he would characterize the call for more imagery an opportunity.

"The reason I would characterize it in terms of opportunity is that the missions we have, including the military missions today, place a very strong emphasis on the flexibility that we need with unclassified products, which the commercial sector provides abundantly," he said.

For example, imagery is provided to the provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan as well as local communities there, Murrett said.

"Because of the [unclassified] commercial sources that we have, we can support them completely, which is a very important part of our mission set," he said.

Another example is the imagery NGA is providing as part of the Gulf oil spill response.

"Being able to provide all the commercially generated products from a whole variety of sources to support mitigation efforts for the Gulf oil spill has provided a level of flexibility that we didn't have, at such large levels, until fairly recently," Murrett added.

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