

National and International Policy Approaches to Earth Observation Data Supply and Distribution

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Over the last decade, policy makers at all levels have increasingly recognized the utility of Earth observation data from spaceborne instruments in supporting the monitoring and management of natural and human processes on Earth. A wide variety of public, private, and public-private satellite systems provide many terabytes of data each year. Some of these systems are research in nature, some provide data for operational purposes such as weather and climate forecasts, and natural and cultural resource management. Yet potential users of satellite data often find it difficult to wade through the profusion of national data policies on costs, distribution, and licensing to make efficient use of the data for their needs. This paper briefly considers the role of satellite Earth observation data in supporting Earth systems monitoring and management. It then summarizes the key elements and characteristics of data policy in the major supplier countries and organizations and explores some of the issues that arise in data sharing, especially for public good uses, such as scientific research, disaster monitoring and management, pollution control, and critical habitat monitoring and management. Finally, it suggests some policy solutions for using Earth observations data in dealing with some of the most serious environmental issues that face the world in the 21st century.