

Space Imaging's IKONOS 1 Lost

The launch of the world's first commercial high-resolution Earth imaging satellite to be took place on 27 April, 1999 from Vandenberg Air Force Base, California. It was planned that the satellite would reach its proper orbit about 90 minutes after launch.

The Lockheed Martin Athena II rocket was launched at 11:22 a.m. PDT from Space Launch Complex 6 (SLC-6) at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. Weather conditions for the launch were good and the countdown was normal. Unfortunately, approximately 480 seconds after liftoff Space Imaging and Lockheed Martin Astronautics lost contact with the satellite. Space Imaging and its prime contractor, Lockheed Martin Corporation, are investigating the anomaly and will determine as quickly as possible the exact causes. At the moment of going to press the most likely scenario is that the payload fairing enclosing the IKONOS 1 spacecraft atop the Athena 2 rocket failed to separate. With the protective shroud still attached, the rocket's upper stage and satellite did not have enough speed to reach a stable orbit around Earth. The vehicle then re-entered the atmosphere over the South Pacific Ocean. The satellite and the launch were insured. Lockheed Martin's Athena rocket, designed as a small payload launcher for its family of larger Atlas and Titan vehicles, has flown five times with two failures.

IKONOS 1, weighing approx. 820 kg, is the world's highest resolution commercial imaging satellite. It was designed to collect imagery that can distinguish objects on the Earth's surface as small as one meter square in size.

IKONOS 2, an identical twin to IKONOS 1, has already been built as a backup in case of an anomaly such as this. It is expected to be launched before the end of this year. No launch date has yet been set.

After the failure of the Earlybird-1 (by Earthwatch), IKONOS 1 would have been the first operational high resolution satellite. Next in line for launch this year are Quickbird-1 (by Earthwatch), Orbview-3 (by Orbimage), EROS-A1 (by West Indian Space) and IKONOS 2.