

EROS future uncertain

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The EROS Data Center in Sioux Falls is in limbo.

By June, it could be bigger and busier than ever before. It could be carrying on business as usual. Or it could be half of what it is today.

No one knows. Not even the director, Allen Watkins.

The uncertainty comes from a White House directive recommending that EROS, or Earth Resources Observation Systems data center, be transferred from its current position in the Interior Department to another in the Department of Commerce. If that move does take place, Watkins said, several unpredictable things could happen.

First, he said, the center could simply move to Commerce, change its letterhead "and run up a new flag." That would have little if any effect.

Second, because of other portions of the presidential directive, the data center could actually become responsible for more work in the area of satellite observation and grow physically and scientifically.

Or, third, Watkins said, a "squabble" could develop between the two involved agencies that would break the data center in two, taking one section to Interior and the other to Commerce.

It is that final possibility that worries Watkins most.

"We think our operations have to be kept together for them to be most efficient and most useful," he said. "We are concerned about that. We don't think it would be the best thing to put one part one place and another somewhere else. It could happen. Let's just say it's a concern."

In the extreme, such a split of the Sioux Falls center could take half of its operations — and people — elsewhere. Watkins said it could be that one section of the center's work, gathering and processing satellite photographs of the Earth, would stay in Sioux Falls. The other section, researching the information

found in those photographs and developing new ways to use it, would then be moved. If that were the case — and Watkins cautions that he doesn't know if it will be — as many as 200 of the 400 center employees would leave.

"As far as we're concerned, that's not something we think should happen," Watkins said. "I've talked to the White House, the Commerce Department, the Interior Department, the National Academy of Sciences — everybody — and they know how we feel."

The hinge on which all will swing is a report to be released next June. In it will be the decision on the move from Interior to Commerce. Watkins said, however, that he and his staff will have a say in the report.

Despite the months of uncertainty ahead, Watkins said there was some of what he considers good news in President Carter's directive. For one thing, the program at EROS will be changed from an "experimental status" to "a fully operational stage." That means the center is viewed by the White House as a more permanent program and, in effect, assures its immediate scientific stability and future.

Watkins also said that if the departmental transfer takes place without a split in the data center, it will be much easier to work with just one agency rather than two — Interior and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The move to Commerce would place EROS under the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, something Watkins would welcome as long as it doesn't split the center along the way.

EROS was established in 1972 as a receiver and archivist for satellite pictures of the Earth. It is also involved in research and training for many aspects of "remotely sensed" information about Earth.

"I hope," Watkins said, "that we can keep everything here together."

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