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25 September 1968

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Project ARGO

Interest in the "peaceful uses" of satellite photography by NPIC dates from 1960, when imagery was obtained by the first successful reconnaissance satellite. As photography accumulated and the state-of-the-art developed, there was recognition that, consistent with the restraints imposed by security, government departments and agencies other than those in the intelligence community should be aware of the product for its contribution to their background knowledge, and, potentially, to their special needs. In 1965, a committee acting under the auspices of the National Security Action Memorandum 156, in a review of national policy for satellite reconnaissance, recommended that measures be devised to give the "civilian agencies" controlled access to information from the satellite reconnaissance systems. In 1966, the Special Assistant to the President for Science and Technology took action to begin a formal study of the classified photography by the "civilian agencies", and with the approval of the Director of Central Intelligence and the Secretary of Defense, and in concert with the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, and Commerce, the Agency for International Development and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, a plan was developed and Project ARGO began in July 1967.

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Project ARGO

A team of resource specialists from the participating agencies and representing the disciplinary interests of agriculture, geology, hydrology, geography, marine sciences, map products and engineering proceeded to investigate the photography from six camera types from four reconnaissance satellite systems in terms of the information content and usefulness to the participating agencies' needs. NPIC provided initial orientation for the team, material and technical assistance during the course of the study.

The results of the evaluation, published in February of 1968, recognized the potential of the material and suggested that some needs of the 'civilian agencies' might be served as by-products of the present intelligence satellite collection systems. As a consequence, at the suggestion of the Special Assistant to the President for Science and Technology, and with the approval of the Director of Central Intelligence, the ARGO Steering Committee was established as a Standing Committee in June 1968, to (1) collect and consolidate the needs of the 'civilian agencies' for photography from the current systems, (2) make these known to the intelligence community, and (3) discuss with the intelligence community procedures for the handling of the material. NPIC maintains a liaison representative to this committee and provides appropriate technical support.