

Accessing Satellite Capabilities to Enable New Discoveries (ASCEND) Act

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NASA acquires important datasets of the Earth from partners in the commercial space sector. This partnership is enabled by the Commercial Space Act of 1998, however in the decades since it became law, there has been rapid growth in the commercial space sector's capabilities to capture images using remote sensing techniques. The launch rate of commercial satellites – including small satellites (“SmallSats”) – has skyrocketed. Over 2,800 SmallSats were launched in 2023, and this number is predicted to grow exponentially through 2030.

Recognizing the opportunities provided by these new potential partners, NASA launched the Private-Sector Small Constellation Satellite Data Product Pilot Program in 2017. The pilot program's goal was to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of commercial datasets for advancing Earth science research and developing new applications. Feedback provided to NASA by researchers was overwhelmingly positive and underscored how accessible commercial data could be useful for a range of disciplines, including agriculture, forestry, weather forecasting, and space science.

Following the successful pilot, NASA established the Commercial SmallSat Data Acquisition (CSDA) Program to continue identifying and evaluating commercial capabilities; establish new processes to onramp vendors; and enable broad sharing and use of acquired data products. Today, 15 commercial vendors are providing 7 unique data types to federal researchers through CSDA.

PROBLEM

Despite the overwhelming success of CSDA, the program's growth has been hindered by stagnant funding levels and lack of long-term certainty. Without Congressional authorization for the CSDA Program, NASA will be unable to fully leverage the advancing capabilities in remote sensing offered by commercial vendors. These partnerships are critical for maintaining global leadership in space and maximizing federal investments in scientific research.

SOLUTION

Building off the success of CSDA to date, the ASCEND Act will permanently authorize CSDA within NASA to enable the program's growth and longevity by:

- Establishing CSDA as a permanent program within NASA's Earth Science Division.
- Directing NASA to expand procurement licenses to provide federal agencies access to high-quality Earth remote sensing datasets and imagery.
- Promoting the acquisition of new datasets for scientific and non-scientific applications.
- Requiring an annual report to Congress on the uses and impact of commercial data products and licensing agreements.

