Latest Earth Satellite Launches from CA Coast

Associated Press

VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. (AP) — A satellite launched into space Monday will keep closer tabs on Earth's glaciers, crops, forests and shorelines, continuing a tradition that began four decades ago.

The Landsat satellite was boosted into orbit by an Atlas V rocket shortly before 11:30 a.m. local time, more than an hour after lifting off from the seaside Vandenberg Air Force Base under mostly clear skies.

Mission controllers tracked the rocket's path as it streaked in a southwesterly direction over the Pacific and climbed into space. Cheers erupted in the control room when engineers received word of spacecraft separation.

"Give yourselves a pat on the back, shake each other's hand, hug each other, cry a little bit and then go celebrate," said NASA Administrator Charles Bolden Jr., who monitored the launch from mission control.

The $855 million mission is the latest in a string of satellites that has kept a continuous eye on Earth's natural resources from space.

Since the first Landsat launch in 1972, the satellites have been key witnesses to history, documenting the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption and the 1986 Chernobyl

nuclear disaster.

Through the years, the Landsat satellites have monitored drought conditions, global crop output, shrinking glaciers and the effects of urban sprawl.

On the eve of the launch, Bolden reflected on the program's longevity, noting that the satellites have given people unprecedented views of Earth.

"Each time we fly, we learn something different we didn't know about Earth," Bolden said.

NASA assistant launch director Tim Dunn said there were no issues with Monday's launch.

"Things could not have gone better today," Dunn said in a post-launch interview on NASA TV. "It really was an absolutely smooth countdown."

The newest Landsat is equipped with sensors that are more powerful than its predecessors. Once it reaches 440 miles above Earth, the satellite will zip around the planet 14 times a day, snapping hundreds of pictures that will be beamed back to ground stations in South Dakota, Alaska and Norway.

After a three-month checkout period, day-to-day operations will be turned over to the U.S. Geological Survey, which intends to make images and data free on the Internet as in previous Landsat missions. NASA developed the spacecraft and its two instruments.

The satellite will operate for five years, though there is enough fuel on board to last 10 years, said Frank Kelly, director of the USGS Center for Earth Resources Observations and Science in Garretson, S.D.

The latest satellite joins Landsat 7, launched in 1999. While Landsat 7 continues to provide daily observations, a problem with one of its instruments has cut the amount of data it can gather.

The USGS recently decided to retire its Landsat 5 satellite after nearly 30 years in service.

USGS scientist Roger Auch said he can't wait for images from the latest Landsat.

"I'm excited to look at the imagery because it's going to be sharper than we dealt with before. I tend to look at things visually, so it should be looking like hi-def TV," he said.

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AP Writer Kristi Eaton in Sioux Falls, S.D. contributed to this report.

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