

# **The Economic Impacts of Open Access Policies for Public Sector Spatial Information**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Governments around the world are the largest producers of spatial information. Public sector spatial information is a major, but so far under-exploited asset, which could and should be a fundamental building block of the new economy and the information society.

United States federal information policy is based on the premise that government information is a valuable national resource and that the economic benefits to society are maximized when government information is available to all. However, other governments do not necessarily share this view and are sometimes treating their information as a commodity to be commercialised.

Arguments to support open access policies have primarily focused on the fact that the information has already been paid for by the taxpayers who should not be charged a second time for it. Although these arguments are convincing to many, they are not yet strong enough to convince all governments to abandon short-sighted attempts to raise relatively small sums of immediate revenue in favour of adopting policies which maximize economic benefit, particularly jobs and wealth, encourage scientific and technological research and development, and thereby ultimately maximize general tax revenues in the longer term.

This paper provides an economic argument to go towards open access policies: Based on the specific economic characteristics of spatial information and both qualitative and quantitative research on economic effects it is argued that open access policies are beneficial in the short term as well as in the longer term for the general public, the private sector and also for government entities.

In addition, this paper looks at the larger public policy issue behind open access policies: government competition with the private sector. Is it proper for a government agency funded primarily by the taxpayers to perform commercial government activities that compete with the private sector?

This research was performed under contract for the United States National Weather Service, as an update to previous research in the field of conflicting information policies [Weiss and Backlund 1997]. The entire research report [Pluijmers and Weiss 2002] and accompanying summary report are forthcoming.

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