

Clinton, Bush support EROS project

Satellites keeping tabs on changing environment

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Careful readers of the Democratic platform will see a line that might ensure a place for EROS Data Center in the world of environmental research.

"We will strongly support our civilian space program, particularly environmental missions," the platform reads.

That line and its purpose connect South Dakota with the rest of the world by supporting a program called Mission to Planet Earth.

The project, funded by the United States, Europe, Canada and Japan, will use Earth Resources Observation Systems, near Sioux Falls, as one of seven centers in the nation to sort information from space about the environment. The program began last year.

"Mission to Planet Earth is a series of satellites and Earth observing platforms which will monitor the Earth's environment for 30 years — land, ocean and upper atmosphere," said Joanne Irene Gabrynowicz,

a professor of space law and policy with the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.

At the Democratic Party convention last week, she enlisted the help of Cathy Piersol, a Sioux Falls lawyer and the state member on the platform committee, to get the line into the document.

"From a platform perspective, relating it to South Dakota, there is a commitment to the civilian space program and the technical gathering programs. And that directly affects EROS," Piersol said.

Bill Clinton's running mate, Sen. Al Gore of Tennessee, is a leading environmentalist in Congress and would become head of the National Space Council that sets space policy if he's elected vice president.

The main mission of the space agency is changing from one of exploring the universe to monitoring the Earth, Gabrynowicz said.

"With him in that position, he will continue to lead the space program in these very important environmental missions, and I'm very excited about that because he really knows his stuff," she said.

But support for the mission and EROS is not limited to the Democrats.

Gore is chairman of the Senate Science,

Technology and Space Subcommittee and Sen. Larry Pressler of South Dakota is the highest ranking Republican on it. Pressler and President Bush support funding for the project.

Within the year, EROS will break ground on a 65,000-square-foot building that will house the processing center for the project, which could employ an additional 150 people, said Ron Beck, technical information officer for EROS.

"Across the board, the politicians have recognized the importance of studying natural resources and the environment. They're all looking at that, justifiably, I think," Beck said.

In full operation, the \$30 billion project will send back to Earth an amount of information equivalent to the Library of Congress every two weeks, Gabrynowicz said. EROS will help process some of that data.

"By putting satellites back into government hands, it makes the information a public good, like weather information. The raw data will be available to research scientists at hopefully affordable rates," she said. "The satellites are in space, but the jobs are on the ground."