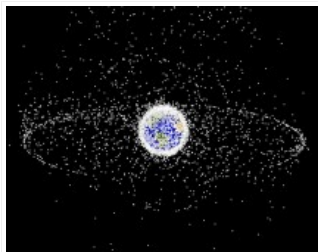




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Scheduled Service

GSA's IT Schedule 70 brings market competition to satellite services acquisition, but a veteran executive asks, does it provide best value?



Written by: [Eric Tegler](#) on June 29, 2011

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A NASA graphic of objects in Earth orbit. NASA image

In the highly likely event you've never heard of the General Services Administration's (GSA) Information Technology Schedule 70, you're not alone. IT Schedule 70 is the federal government's primary contractual vehicle for the purchase of commercial satellite services. As of last year, the government is reforming the way it buys these services under a program called the Future Commercial Satellite Communications (COMSATCOM) Services Acquisition (FSCA).

FSCA replaces satellite services contracts formerly issued by the GSA and the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA). The new FSCA Schedule 70 includes four types of contract awards. The first pair – transponder services and subscription services – are specific satellite services that require no development or systems integration activities.

The remaining contract types are multiple indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity awards to vendors who provide end-to-end satellite or "managed" communications solutions. These are referred to as custom SATCOM solutions and custom SATCOM solutions – small business.

The Schedule 70 awards are essentially pre-negotiated contracts at pre-negotiated prices. A pool of SATCOM companies or service providers is approved by the government (DISA/GSA) to bid for satellite services task orders. As such, existing vendors now have to compete for a particular task order.

"The theory is that once a particular vendor or vendors are deemed worthy of being on this contract, they effectively have a license to hunt," Inmarsat's Rebecca Cowen-Hirsch explains. "They have a contract though it doesn't necessarily mean that they have any revenues or are doing any business. It just means that when a user comes in with a task order, [a vendor] has the ability to compete for that work."

Cowen-Hirsch is senior vice president, government policy, strategy, & outreach at Inmarsat Government Services, Inc. Though her feet are firmly in the commercial sector, her familiarity with satellite services acquisition is as in-depth as you're likely to find. Prior to joining Inmarsat in 2008, she was program executive officer, SATCOM, teleport & service for the Department of Defense. Her time as PEO followed stints as vice component acquisition executive at DISA and as director of the Defense Spectrum Office.

Given her technical and acquisition background, Cowen-Hirsch is highly qualified to comment on the prospects of the new Schedule 70. With DoD facing formidable budgetary challenges, we asked her for a few thoughts on the early phases of FSCA.

Defense Media Network (DMN): A market-driven approach to buying satellite services seems logical and potentially cost-effective. Yet, you've expressed concern with the process. Why?

Rebecca Cowen-Hirsch: Where I struggle is whether or not this competition will have the effect of commoditizing bandwidth. There is a [lowest cost] price for cheap bandwidth for emergent uses or unanticipated requirements. But the challenge when you commoditize bandwidth prices is that you can actually reduce the warfighter best value.

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Because there are information assurance requirements, mission assurance requirements, and value-added services that each vendor must provide, reducing the [contract award] to just a cost shootout leads to the question of whether the warfighter is getting what he requires versus just cheap bandwidth.

So you think a lowest common denominator approach to buying satellite services might degrade the quality of what is actually offered?

Best value is more than a cheap price. There's a fundamental mission requirement when more than 80 percent of your satellite communication capabilities are flowing across commercial SATCOM. The old adage that 'you get what you pay for' can apply.

You've noted that the DISA/GSA personnel evaluating potential Schedule 70 vendors for contract award, and hence the opportunity for task orders, frequently lack commercial and military SATCOM expertise. Shouldn't the process be vetted by experts?

It would be reasonable for them to bring onto the technical evaluation board someone from the using community to provide additional expertise. Bringing those people together and having an open competition to ensure the right value for money and operational requirements is going to be essential.

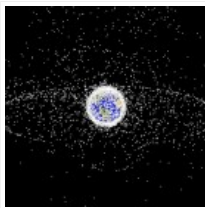
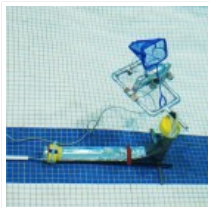
The transponded and subscription services contract awards already appear to be commodity-like, routine purchases since they require no development or systems integration. The more complex Tier III or managed services contracts seem to be those at risk. However, if best value can be properly evaluated, do you think the opportunity to realize cost savings from these would be greater?

Tier III may be the [contract] with the most opportunity for real operational success. With so much focus within the Department of Defense, particularly in this austere budget environment, on capabilities-based acquisition, being able to bring that end-to-end managed service to the warfighter is highly important.

So bottom-line, you're saying you can't buy SATCOM the same way you buy computers and office supplies?


Absolutely. Satellite communications aren't sexy, but what we're seeing is that, regardless of service branch, [they're in] great demand. That's true for our system as it is for many others.

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