

# USGS denies industry link in Thomas case

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) has categorically denied that the dismissal of an environmental mapping expert was in any way connected to controversy about oil development. The contract worker in question, Ian Thomas, had posted maps showing caribou calving areas on a government Web site just before his dismissal in March (see Euro News, May).

Although Thomas says his dismissal came as a complete surprise, USGS public affairs officer, Trudy Harlow, gave GeoEurope a different version of events: "A workplan had been put into effect about a year ago under which Mr. Thomas was

supposed to be structuring his work. This workplan did not include any of the elements that Mr. Thomas put into his 'Global Environmental Atlas,' which he created and posted without authorisation or approval."

"The workplan was put into effect because of Mr. Thomas' propensity for working outside of the scope of the contract and it was created in collaboration with his employer, Applied Process Lab Inc. of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. When Mr. Thomas continued to work out-

side the scope of the contract, the 'task order' under which he was hired was discontinued."

Harlow says that it was not the content of the latest set of maps that he had just posted, but rather Thomas' failure to stick to



Much ado about Caribou?

his 'workplan' that finally caused his dismissal. She refutes his contention that no review process existed and stressed that all the content specified in Thomas' workplan had

been subject to peer review under USGS stringent review guidelines.

"When he branched out into other areas, USGS could not guarantee either the accuracy of the data he used or the reliability of the maps he created. Because the maps were neither asked for nor needed, the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center [the division of USGS form which Thomas was working] made the decision not to invest more dollars into making them usable and maintaining them."

Harlow dismisses the notion that Thomas' departure was connected with controversy surrounding oil industry developments. "This was not about ANWR [the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, home to a large caribou population and the area covered by Thomas' last postings], but about a management problem named Ian Thomas. Since maps covering the caribou calving grounds are openly available on the Arctic Refuge Web site, this argument just doesn't hold water."

In commenting on the public data dissemination policy of the new Bush-led administration at the Department of the Interior (DOI), Harlow was categorical. "I can state that there has been no restriction at all by the new administration on any distribu-

tion of information on ANWR."

Thomas maintains that the decision to dismiss him was a high-level political decision and cites as evidence the following extract from an e-mail he received from a well-placed colleague just after his dismissal: "The fallout would not have been so great had the subject matter not been one of the three USDO super hot topics with the new administration and had we not been briefing the Secretary at the nearly exact time your website went up. Everyone is nervous and as I mentioned earlier, consistency in presentation is paramount."

"USGS has [...] failed to address the most important implications raised by this email, specifically that Federal wildlife researchers are now working under increased political pressure," Thomas says.

Undeterred, the mapping specialist is now using the Freedom of Information Act to acquire data needed to update the caribou maps that he has reposted on his own Web site. He has also been busy working on a short-term biodiversity mapping contract at the GIS Lab of the World Wildlife Fund in Washington.

In another interesting development, Thomas is applying his expertise in satellite imagery by appearing as a witness for the prosecution in a US Federal court case. This concerns an Indonesian general accused of repressing separatists in East Timor and where prosecution attorney is Judith Chomsky, daughter of Noam Chomsky, the US phenomenologist and activist.

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge  
<http://www.fws.gov/arctic>

Ian Thomas' 'USGS spin control'  
[http://www.maptricks.com/usgs\\_spin\\_control.html](http://www.maptricks.com/usgs_spin_control.html)

Patuxent Wildlife Research Centre  
<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov>

## Ah, beautiful Europe...

A March meeting of EU environment ministers in Kiruna, Sweden, saw the launch of two new important European mapping products from Metria Satellus, the business division of the Swedish National Land Survey (SNLS). Metria recently acquired the business and staff of Satellus from the Swedish Space Corporation.

The first of these, a 160-metre resolution mosaic of the continent, has been designed for regional GIS, flight simulation, and vegetation studies applications. It is suitable for work at mapping scales of 1:500,000 and smaller and can be made compatible with various European mapping systems. The mosaic is based on a series of satellite images captured during the 1996-1998 period by the Russian Resurs O3 satellite. Cloud-free portions of the 200 processed images were geometrically corrected by Metria Satellus. WorldSat International Inc. of Canada then generated the mosaic, colour balanced, and produced the final composite data set which is available with or without relief shading.



Beautiful Europe, as seen from outer-space by Russia's Resurs O3 satellite on that imaginary cloud-free afternoon

The second new product is a digital elevation model (DEM) covering Europe and parts of North Africa. Derived from high resolution flight-simulation terrain databases, generated from level 1 DTED. The DEM has a 90-metre grid and can be used to remove parallax errors in satellite images and aerial photographs. Accuracy of 25 metres horizontally and 15 metres vertically is guaranteed, and extracts for regional or national coverage can be supplied.

Swedish National Land Survey  
 English site  
[http://www.lantmateriet.se/index\\_eng.htm](http://www.lantmateriet.se/index_eng.htm)