IGN looks to core data as its raison d'être

The National Geographic Institute (IGN), France's national mapping agency, came into existence in 1940 as a civilian replacement for the Geographic Service of the Armed Forces, itself created in 1887. The agency is parented by the Ministry of Public Works and last year generated revenues of €115 million. Of its 1,800-strong workforce, around 130 run the Ecole Nationale des Sciences Géographiques, France's prestigious national surveying college.

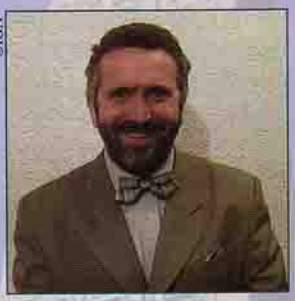
The dual remit of the agency is to serve government ministries with advice and GI products that are standardised over time and territory, and to publish up-to-date 1:25,000 base maps of the entire country. The latter are produced against a business model whereby sales of maps covering more popular areas subsidise those in lesser demand.

IGN physically hosts the secretariat of the Centre National de l'Information Géographique (CNIG), a government body created in 1985 to foster and co-ordinate use of geographic information. The CNIG (also part of the Ministry of Public Works), sponsors the activities of the Association Française de l'Information Géographique (AFIGEO), a grouping of public and private sector organisations that collaborate in areas of GI research. AFIGEO organises seminars and publishes technical papers in close co-ordination with the CNIG.

IGN plays an active role in pan-European GI activities, being a full member of EUROGI, CERCO, and MEGRIN. Furthermore, the agency has forged alliances with commercial concerns at home and abroad including ADDE, ISTAR, ESRI, and LaserScan, the latter having provided the institute with its LAMPS2 cartographic software (see GE April). IGN is also a shareholder in various companies including Spot Image and Navtech.

Changing times

In common with national mapping agencies everywhere, IGN is adapting to the needs of the Information Age. It is currently in the process of digitising or compiling various data sets, e.g., 'BD Topo', a one-metre resolution topographic data set available in standard GIS formats for urban, real-estate, and environmental applications.



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Salgé: "IGN competitors will be from now on in the value adding services area rather than in the core information domain."

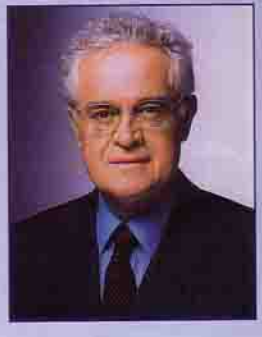
BD Topo will be completed by 2005 and cover approximately one third of France, including most centres of population and the whole of the Riviera. It is interoperable with BD Ortho, a tiff database of aerial photographs that will cover some 30 of the country's 96 departments by the end of the year. Also in the portfolio is BD Carto, a 10-metre resolution national data set comprising digitised 1:50,000 maps, Spot satellite imagery and other compatible data modules, some of which are the fruits of collaboration with the likes of Spot Image and GeoConcept. Examples of these modules include BD Alti (3D data), Géoroute (urban road data), and Route 120 (comprehensive road data and route planning).

IGN competes with map-makers such as Michelin and data providers such as Navtech and TeleAtlas. François Salgé, IGN's director of international and European activities, says that the institute is positioning itself as the core provider of a data infrastructure accessible to public and private actors under the same conditions. "It means that IGN competitors will be from now on in the value adding services area rather than in the core information domain," he adds.

The case for reform

A parliamentary mission charged last year with examining the state of the domestic GI market (see GE December) recommended reform of the institute. The "Rapport Lengagne" urged various measures that would modernise the acquisition and public dissemination of geographic information; co-ordinate the activities of IGN with those of the national cadastre agency; and make IGN financially accountable. Four workgroups were then appointed to make concrete proposals to the Ministry of Public Works, but these have been judged timid and various actors within IGN and the cadastre agency are said to be resisting change. Guy Lengagne, the principal author of the initial report, warns against a lack of political measures to spearhead reforms. Nevertheless, an official re-definition of IGN and a 5-year funding contract for 2001-2005 are still expected to be agreed upon this summer between the government and the agency.

A key issue is the way in which the country's national spatial data infrastructure is funded and which, of course, dictates how quickly IGN can pursue its digitisation programme. Salgé points out that, in contrast with Britain's Ordnance Survey and some other national mapping agencies, IGN has not so far benefited from a large government investment in the digitalisation of the entire country's base maps. "I see the spatial data infrastructure as crucial to attain a level of market development that will justify the optimistic forecasts [of the rapid growth of the use of GI]," he notes.



Getting the politicians on board: French premier Lionel Jospin, who ordered, and supposedly read, the Lengagne report. According to 'SIG la lettre', a GIS newletter, Jospin uttered the phrase "geographic information system" for the first time on record last February. He was announcing a government-sponsored GIS that will monitor coastal zones and help track oil spills of the type that recently afflicted the beaches of southern Brittany

To foster a faster take-up of GI in France, Salgé would like to see politicians become more aware of the areas where GI can be of value. He concludes that priorities include educating youngsters with GI manipulation (as is now being done with word processing, database, and spreadsheet use), and training technicians in GI sciences. G

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