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White House OKs new satellite program

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WASHINGTON, April 8 (UPI) -- A new, top-secret satellite program to replace the country's aging imagery system has been OK'd by the White House, the top U.S. intelligence officer said.

National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair said in a statement Tuesday the plan calls for development of new satellites and an increased use of imagery from commercial satellites, CNN reported Wednesday.

Details about the program or its cost weren't revealed because the program is classified.

The program is to replace existing satellites expected to reach the end of their life within the next 10 years or so, officials said.

The military currently buys commercial imagery from commercial entities DigitalGlobe and GeoEye to supplement government satellite system, CNN said. The new plan would offer the longer-term contracts to commercial companies, enabling the firms to launch more sophisticated satellites should they decide to do so.

Once Congress approves the program's budget, implementation could begin within months. Intelligence officials didn't indicate when the new satellites would be ready for launch.

While Blair and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates are behind the project, congressional members question its cost, expected to run in the billions. U.S. Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri, ranking Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he favors an alternative, less expensive system.

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