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# Forecasting better with 'eyes in the sky'



**WOODY WHITLATCH**  
**WEATHER WORDS**

Over the last 50 years, technological advances have greatly improved our ability to forecast the weather. Supercomputers are used to obtain and map measured data and run forecast models that require billions of computations. Another technical tool that revolutionized the way observations are made and forecasts are developed is the weather satellite.

The practice of taking pictures of clouds from above started in the post World War II rocket age. In 1947, an unmanned American rocket equipped with a camera recorded pictures of the earth's clouds from space. Ten years later, Russia's Sputnik orbited the earth. Its primary purpose was to measure and transmit atmospheric density information back to earth.

*"Although the space race seemed to be an extension of the Cold War, the meteorological community benefited greatly since many of the early satellites were deployed to take pictures of the earth below."*

**Woody Whitlatch**

With the launch of Sputnik, the United States accelerated its space conquest program. Although the space race seemed to be an extension of the Cold War, the meteorological community benefited greatly since many of the early satellites were deployed to take pictures

of the earth below. It was evident that pictures of cloud cover, weather fronts and hurricanes would enhance the science of weather forecasting.

The first satellite dedicated solely to weather observations, TIROS, was launched by the United States in 1960. This satellite enabled meteorologists to compare ground based observations with larger scale cloud formations. This program was so successful that nine additional TIROS satellites were launched by the end of the decade.

A major achievement in the evolution of weather satellites was the launch of a geostationary satellite in 1966. A geostationary satellite is launched in an orbit about 22,000 miles above the earth. At this orbit height, the satellite travels at the same speed that the earth rotates. The benefit of a geostationary orbit is that it allows cloud pictures to be taken from the same reference point. Meteorologists look at sequential cloud pictures, a technique called looping, and measure the movement of individual weather systems.

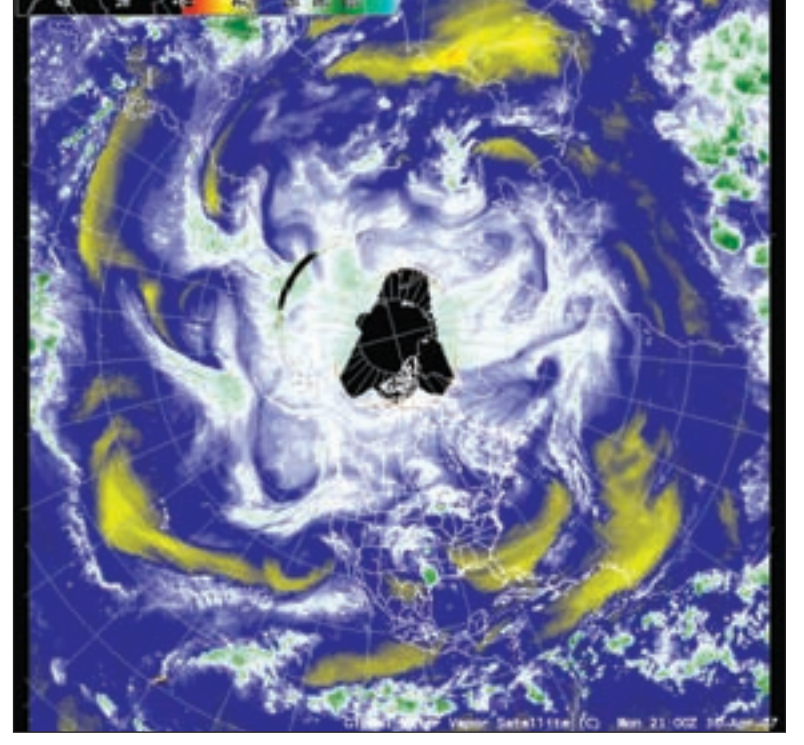
Currently, there are five geostationary satellites around the globe spaced about 30 degrees longitude apart. These solar powered units can be easily repositioned in case one fails, so that global coverage continues.

The earliest satellite photographs showed visible image pictures of cloud formations, similar to what you would get with a standard camera. Since the sun is the main light source for visible images, a huge disadvantage of the visible photo-

graphs is that no pictures are available at night. In recent years, both infrared and water vapor images have been added to the array of satellite products.

Infrared images sense the amount of radiation reflected from the earth and clouds, and the colors on the infrared scale correspond to the temperature

water vapor image. Meteorologists use these photos to show patterns of moisture and dryness. To get this information, satellites measure the amount of energy that water vapor molecules emit. Meteorologists use this information to track the movement of clouds, precipitation and even



A water vapor image from AWIPS (Advanced Weather Interactive Processing System) shows North America during April 2007.

non-cloudy air masses. In the early 1960s, our local newspaper would publish the times that the man-made satellites would cross the night sky. I remember standing outside and watching with wonder as a satellite would orbit overhead. Little did I know that one of those orbiters was taking pictures of the sky. And how would I have guessed that these eyes in the sky would become a tool I would use as a professional meteorologist many years later?

Woody Whitlatch is a meteorologist with PG&E. Email your questions or comments to clayton\_909@yahoo.com

of the object being photographed. Clouds are usually higher in the sky than land or ocean objects, and are therefore much cooler. Since cloud temperatures change little between night and day, infrared photographs can continually track cloud movement. An additional benefit of the infrared images is the ability to track the movement of developing storms. Since storm clouds develop vertically as they strengthen, the cold high cloud tops associated with these storms show up nicely on infrared images.

A third useful type of satellite photograph is called the

## Financial, from page A11

- Technology – computer hardware and software, Internet companies
- Transportation – airlines, delivery services

**TIMING IS EVERYTHING**  
 Generally, stock investors are best served by using a "buy-and-hold" approach – investing in a stock or equity mutual fund and keeping the money invested for a number of years. That reduces the chance of a loss that is more likely to occur if the security is traded over a short period of time.

Cyclical stock investors take a different approach to improve their profit potential. When busi-

ness or economic signals appear favorable, that is considered a buying opportunity. But when they perceive that conditions are changing for the worse in a particular industry, they want to liquidate stock positions in advance of any major slide in stock price.

Cyclical investors must try to determine when a company or industry has reached a low point (a sign that it is time to invest) and when it may be near its peak (a signal that it is time to sell the position). Timing the market in such a way can be a significant challenge for any investor. Typically, it requires a good deal of time and effort researching the market and specific stocks.

## CYCLICAL STOCKS IN TODAY'S MARKET

The current economic environment, which appears to be slowing, does not present as many attractive buying opportunities for investors looking for cyclical stocks. Certain areas of the economy, such as housing, are facing significant challenges. If consumer spending should slow, consumer cyclical stocks are likely to suffer as well. This is particularly true of stocks related to non-essential items for consumers or businesses. For instance, individuals concerned that they may face a possible layoff are less likely to spend money on a new car or a big screen TV, dampening prospects for companies that produce those items.

Remember that cyclical investing involves significant knowledge and time in order to generate returns that will outpace what you can earn by simply buying and holding a stock mutual fund. Consult a financial advisor to review your overall financial picture.

Mureleen Benton is a Certified Financial Planner. Call her with questions at 685-4523

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