

Your Royal Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we came together here in Antwerp for a joyous occasion, and it is all the more joyous, Your Royal Highness, because of your presence here and your ongoing interest in all matters related to Space.

First of all, we are here to commemorate and celebrate a remarkable achievement. For 15 years, the SPOT Végétation mission has been operational.

For 15 years, SPOT Végétation 1 and 2 have, day after day, captured images of the entire terrestrial surface.

For 15 years, these images were delivered like clockwork to users throughout the world.

For 15 years, this ever growing number of users relied on these images for monitoring agriculture and the impact of human and climate factors on our green environment.

For 15 years, SPOT Végétation has been an excellent example of what European collaboration in Earth Observation can achieve, and for that I want to applaud the SPOT Végétation partners: CNES, the European Commission, the Swedish National Space Board, the Italian Space Agency, and the Belgian Science Policy Office (also called BELSPO). I also want to recommend VITO, for their fine work in processing, hosting and distributing the images. The SPOT Végétation processing facility was the first operational facility of this type entirely financed by BELSPO and I am pleased to see how this investment paid off.

But today also marks the beginning of a new era. When, a couple of years ago, it became clear that a SPOT Végétation 3 was not feasible at the time, the thousands and thousands of users of SPOT Végétation images were in danger of being bereft of data.

Little Belgium rose to the occasion. With vision and dedication, it engaged, the European Space Agency, in the development of a follow-up mission to be called: PROBA-V.

It aimed at emulating the high standards set by SPOT Végétation with today's technology, all wrapped up in flexible, cheap and amazingly compact platform. It even wanted to give the users more: 300 m resolution products in addition to 1km products.

This was a very ambitious undertaking. A lot of people were very sceptical and did not believe that the technological challenges could not be overcome on such a short time. They did not believe this could be an operational mission. Some thought that PROBA was derived from the Spanish verb "probar", meaning to merely experiment.

Today I can tell you that those sceptics were wrong.

It has been done! The technological challenges were overcome! PROBA-V was launched on time and will make good on its promises, for the benefit of those who are monitoring our living green planet.

For this remarkable achievement I congratulate, and I hope you will allow me some chauvinism today, the Belgian industrial PROBA-V partners who came through: Qinetiq, OIP, Spacebel, Xenics, AMOS, together with VITO. They worked under the impressive supervision by ESA and were supported with energy and enthusiasm by my administration.

Lastly, I would like to thank BELSPO and VITO, for bringing people from the worlds of industry, science and governments together today, and I hope that the discussions and interactions amongst you may lead to a new chapter in the global vegetation monitoring saga in the near future.

On this note, I want to thank you for attention and I wish all of you a memorable and fruitful conference.

Mr Philippe Courard, State Secretary for Belgian Science Policy