

International Institute of Space Law/European Commission of Space Law - Panel Discussion on Very Small Satellites
Vienna - 24rd March 2014



Photo Credit: Isis Space

We were lucky enough to be invited to attend the United Nations Office in Vienna, Austria on the 24th of March 2014 for the IISL/ECSL symposium. In the afternoon session a panel of experts were invited to discuss the positive and negative aspects of Very Small Satellites (VSS). VSS are satellites which weigh 500kg or less and are therefore much smaller than those traditionally deployed in space.

The first speaker, Abe Bonnema from ISIS Space, detailed the benefits of VSS. The principle benefit identified was the significantly reduced cost, which provides developing nations with the opportunity to become space-faring and allows non-governmental entities, such as universities, access to space and space technology. Further, the reduced weight allows for piggy-back launches and VSS provide a platform to test new technologies before a major launch.

Other members of the panel subsequently tempered this, noting the negative aspects of VSS. The drawbacks include; the potential for radio interference or the obstruction of existing frequencies, the difficulty in controlling VSS after deployment due to the lack of navigational ability and the difficulty of monitoring them due to their size. The panel also highlighted the issue of space debris and the potential for VSS to exacerbate this. The cost of insurance being greater than the cost of the VSS was also raised.

Despite these drawbacks the affordability of VSS means that they remain an attractive option for the utilisation of space. However, as the panel concluded, an urgent need for VSS-specific regulation exists.