



The Four Winds

National Weather Service Employees Organization

NWS Adopts Policy of Degradation of Services for the First Time Since Before the Modernization

ERH Announces Elimination of Forecast and Public Service Shifts Due to Escalating Vacancy Rates

(October 23, 2017). The National Weather Service, an agency that has faithfully served the Nation and Public for nearly 150 years, for the first time in its history is close to teetering on the brink of failure. For the past several years, the NWS Leadership has been incapable of placing their budget priorities correctly, spending money on Management conferences and blended models rather than on filling the nearly 700 vacant forecast positions. In fact, the NWS Nationwide has not had full staffing levels for at least seven years. As vacancies continued to increase, the NWS Director in Eastern Region Headquarters (ERH) announced that at three (3) Weather Forecast Offices (Raleigh, NC, Burlington, VT, and Binghamton NY) he is ordering his managers to reduce the number of forecast shifts due to the large number of vacancies. Also, there have been reports that some local managers across the country have proposed the elimination of the Public Service Forecast desk and other shifts again, due to vacancies. The NWS Roadmap to expand and provide Impact Decision Support Services to **CORE CUSTOMERS**, like Emergency Managers, State and Local Governments has been effectively torn up with no chance of success.

Meanwhile, employees have been working almost daily, with longer shifts and a greater number of overtime hours, which has brought on unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. If a health emergency arrives at an office, long term leave needed, a family emergency, or injury or whatever life throws at each of us every single day, Weather Forecast Offices and elsewhere do not have the bodies to continue working at safe, healthy level. The stressful and tiring workload has many members sleep deprived and extremely frustrated with the lack of help from management. The message sent has been loud and clear – management places more concern on their priorities than the health and safety of their employees who are sacrificing their health and welfare. What is even more frustrating to observe is the plain and obvious inequality from NWS Management when it comes to hiring management positions versus operational staff. For example, a WCM position at NWS Buffalo has received higher priority (no other staffing shortages at that office) than the dire need to help an office that has seen a staffing shortage of 4 to 7 people for years!

“NWSEO stewards and members across the country are screaming *enough is enough!*” stated NWSEO National President Dan Sobien. Members are writing letters and reaching out to their NWS Regional Directors, Senators, and Representatives interviewing with local media, sharing their story of severe staffing shortages with barely enough personnel on station to provide the basic weather services, watches and warnings.

The NWS is now degrading services as management has proposed dropping forecast shifts in understaffing offices hampering the ability to serve the public. Employees in the field are experiencing first-hand the degradation of NWS services and have also shouldered the burden of increase stress, increased workload, sleep deprivation, low morale and extremely frustrated with the lack of help from management.

In Binghamton, New York, new DSS initiatives have been scaled back; storm surveys have been at times forgone; research and training opportunities lost; program development slowed or halted. And Raleigh, NC has several forecasters uncharacteristically becoming short tempered. One forecaster stated: "Recently I have been experiencing both physical and mental symptoms relating to unrelenting stress. 95% of this is work related. Periods of depression, more easily angered, high blood pressure, muscle tension."

Here is a list of reported impacts:

- Operational vacancies up to 50% (5 forecaster Vacancies), a State liaison WFO serving a population of several million;
- A stressful, tiring, and unhealthy work environment with plummeting low employee morale;
- Employees are sleep deprived, out with sicknesses, extremely frustrated and irritable;
- Some WFOs no longer have the staffing resources in place, during all hazard events, to provide all necessary weather support to key stakeholder like (EMA's, State/Local Governments, FEMA, Members of the Media, School Districts, FAA, Water Resource Managers, Public and many others). In a direct quote from a MIC at an impacted WFO: "I cannot afford to lose another person for an extended length of time. Regretfully, your request to voluntarily help FEMA is not approved."
- Forecasters reporting headaches and vertigo that wouldn't go away for a month or more at a time, from sleep deprivation and stress.
- Forecasters working hundreds and thousands of hours of overtime to meet regular operations, not including overtime hours for severe weather coverage;
- No Work-life balance. Constant overtime and double shifts with limited days off are affecting employee's health both physically and mentally;
- Round the clock stresses are affecting families, personal life, children (asking - why do you work so much?), and relationships;
- Employees canceling important medical appointments, cancelling or being DENIED their own annual leave;
- Ended the ability to maintain specialized training, certifications, and career development
- Places the NWS's vision of a Science-Based Service Organization and Weather-Ready Nation (WRN) in serious jeopardy as WFOs are enthusiastic to expand their reach and provide more customized Impact-Based Decision Support Services (IDSS) to end users/customers but cannot do so with the current staffing limitations. There are not enough forecasters to fill basic operational shifts.
- For big storms the understaffed office will be unable to fully sustain even legacy operations, let alone expand into IDSS;

For several years the NWS upper management has been quoted saying, “Vacancies are my number 1 priority” and “we’re on top of this” when speaking of filling positions. Management has blamed “the system” like WFMO, or Accenture or YRCI or politics like hiring freezes and budget cuts when *the agency itself* doesn’t even submit the vacancies in the pipeline? In fact, there are hundreds of vacant positions across the NWS in which hiring actions haven’t even been submitted. “Folks, it’s a lie and a shell game that has been going on under the tenure of the NWS upper management the past several years with one excuse after another,” stated NWSEO Secretary/Treasurer, Eastern Region Chair, David Solano.

The staffing shortage issues are nationwide. An NWSEO Steward who works in the National Centers for Environmental Prediction at the Storm Prediction Center, is also feeling the impacts of reduced staffing over the past two years. He shared his story with FOX25 KOKH-TV, Oklahoma City. “The unfilled vacancies at the NWS are reducing the quality of warnings and forecasts because of strained resources, etc.”

NWS defines Impact-Based Decision Support Services (IDSS) as: “Provision of relevant information and interpretative services to enable Core Partners Decisions when weather, water, or climate has a direct impact on the protection of lives and livelihood.” Instead of the agency moving forward by providing IDSS and having a Weather Ready Nation, we have an agency that now has nearly 700 vacant positions across the country, offices dangerously short staffed, employees becoming ill, sleep deprived and overworked and no longer having the capability of providing these enhanced products and services. Instead of ramping up to provide new forecasts and services, forecast shifts are being eliminated, public service forecast desks are being dropped, and products and services are degrading. This means less commitment to, and support for Emergency Management Agencies, state and local governments and the public. “It’s just a matter of time before someone dies from these poor management decisions.” stated Sobien.

For years NWS senior management has been telling their employees they must *evolve* the agency to meet needs for the future. However, the NWS is *evolving* into something that’s almost unrecognizable to all of us - the dedicated staff that has unselfishly served and sacrificed so much over the years to meet every demand and forecasting challenge that came our way.

-NWSEO-

No one cares more for National Weather Service employees
than National Weather Service employees

No one works harder for National Weather Service employees
than National Weather Service employees

We are NWSEO