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NOAA institutes a hiring freeze, worrying emergency managers

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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has implemented a hiring freeze as a way of saving money in a tight budget environment.

The freeze took effect last week and applies to civilian appointments except those already advertised. It drew criticism from emergency managers worried that the National Weather Service, the NOAA office on the front line of severe weather warnings and storm forecasting, would suffer.

Eddie Hicks, the emergency manager for Morgan County, Ala., and former president of the International Association of Emergency Managers, said the weather service's office in his region, which is vulnerable to tornadoes, is already short-staffed.

"We are looking to the National Weather Service to have the adequate staffing to be able to warn the public, to let the emergency managers know what conditions they need to be prepared for, so it's very concerning to us because we know that some of the local offices are understaffed now," said Hicks.

While Hicks said that, to date, the low staffing levels have not led to mistakes in warnings or forecasting, he was concerned this might happen in the future.

Ciaran Clayton, director of communications at NOAA, said the agency has "put processes in place that ensure we can continue to deliver on the lifesaving products and services people have come to rely upon."

Although NOAA's hiring freeze just went into effect, the National Weather Service Employees Organization, the labor union representing employees of the National Weather Service, had already filed grievances with the service for failing to fill a number of forecaster positions nationwide.

Forecasters who aren't there

Daniel Sobien, NWSEO president, said that in the last two years, the vacancy rate at the weather service has tripled, and there are now more than 200 unfilled positions there.

A grievance filed March 13 by NWSEO lists nine senior forecaster vacancies in major U.S. cities, including two in the Sterling, Va., office that issues forecasts for the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore metropolitan areas.

Another grievance, filed March 25, cites the service for failing to fill general forecaster vacancies across the country, including in Houston and Fairbanks, Alaska.

Sobien gave the example of recent poor forecasting of the early March snowstorm predicted to hit Washington, D.C., as an example of what happens when forecasters are stretched thin. But that's not the worst that can happen, he warned.

"People are going to be overworked, they're going to be tired, they're going to miss warnings. We're going to miss a tornado warning or some other thing."

Emergency managers said they hoped an exception could be made in the hiring freeze for personnel like weather forecasters whose accurate forecasts might be able to save lives. This could happen, as NOAA is able to review vacancies and make exceptions to the freeze for critical positions.

Sen. Mark Begich (D-Alaska), chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and the Coast Guard, worried the decision to freeze hiring for forecasters could lead to negative effects.

"If we can find a way to exempt critical government services like meat inspection from the sequester, we should be able to find a way to keep NOAA forecaster positions filled. With spring break up and wildfire season approaching, we can't afford the number of forecaster vacancies that are anticipated in Alaska," Begich said in a statement.

It's not just emergency managers who rely on accurate weather forecasting. In the West, water managers depend on accurate forecasts of streamflow.

Western states worry about water management

This year, Denver Water, which serves 1.1 million people in the city of Denver and many surrounding suburbs, used streamflow predictions from the National Weather Service's Colorado River Basin Forecast Center to help it decide whether to restrict water use this year.

"This year, the forecasts were used to help us make the decision to go on watering restrictions because we are in a drought," said Bob Steger, Denver Water's manager of raw water supply.

Steger was unsure whether a hiring freeze would affect those forecasts or the long-range precipitation forecasts he and other water managers rely on, but he said they were important.

Research may be less affected by the hiring freeze.

Research institutions that work with both NOAA and university scientists are more worried about the future availability of federal grant funding than hiring positions, said Jon Rush, the associate director for administration at the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Studies.

CIRES is a joint institute funded by the University of Colorado and NOAA. It hosts the National Snow and Ice Data Center and the Earth Science and Observation Center, along with many other Earth system research endeavors.

Rush said there's not typically a lot of turnover there, so hiring is not a big factor.

"Unlike the hiring freeze, the federal budget scares us," he said. "Sequestration is going to be painful on NOAA cooperative institutes."

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