



The Four Winds

National Weather Service Employees Organization

DECEMBER 2005

TIGER TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS ARE MIXED BAG FOR NWS EMPLOYEES, AMERICAN PUBLIC

The three “Tiger Teams” appointed by NWS Director D.L. Johnson have submitted their recommendations to the NWS Corporate Board. If implemented, some of the recommendations will improve the quality of service which the agency provides the American public. Other recommendations will jeopardize aviation safety as well as NWS employees’ jobs.

The good news for NWS employees and the public they service is that the team assigned to develop a new “Concept of Operations” for field services rejected the “Nested Office Concept” which would have consolidated the forecasting operations and reduced staff and hours of operations at most WFOs. Last month, a House-Senate Conference Committee directed that “no funds shall be used to implement a plan to consolidate, regionalize, or reduce service hours at weather service forecast offices.”

The Concept of Operations team recommended that WFOs be assigned to “peer clusters” so that routine product preparation can be off-loaded to a neighboring office during high impact events or during training. According to Dan Sobien, NWSEO Vice President who served on this team, this collaborative approach will help solve long standing back-up problems. “If done correctly it will position the NWS to have the resources to posture itself to provide future products and services as well as develop new expertise with time for forecasters to train. It is evolutionary not revolutionary, building on what is right with the agency.” However, the recommendations call for the occasional closure of WFOs for training or other purposes, a move that NWSEO continues to oppose and which is prohibited by Congress.

The recommendations of the Aviation Tiger Team will endanger the safety of civilian aviation and NWSEO will urge that they be rejected. The Aviation “Tiger Team” was appointed to “develop a strategy to secure our role in the provision of aviation products and services” has submitted recommendations which would dramatically restructure the NWS’ aviation services. In summary, the team has recommended that the NWS establish an unspecified number of regional “Aviation Transportation Weather

Offices” or “ATWOs.” The forecasters assigned to the ATWOs will issue all the “Terminal Aviation Forecasts” or “TAFS” currently issued locally by forecasters at WFOs. In addition, the NWS would also close all the Center Weather Service Units (“CWSUs”) collocated at the 21 FAA Air Route Traffic Control Centers (“ARTCCs”). The forecasters at the ATWOs will be responsible for briefing FAA personnel remotely on emerging weather situations that affect the safety and traffic management of civilian aviation. *A detailed analysis of the Aviation Team’s Recommendations is attached to the end of this issue of the Four Winds.*

A third Tiger Team studied and made recommendations to consolidate field IT functions. This team’s report is highly technical and has been submitted to a team of NWSEO members who are ITs for study before NWSEO announces a formal position on the team’s recommendations.

NWSEO AND NWS SENIOR LEADERSHIP MEET TO DISCUSS CONTINUED UNION INVOLVEMENT

In a very positive sign, senior NWS leadership has initiated a series of meetings with NWSEO to solicit the union’s feedback on the recommendations of the Tiger Teams and to invite the union to have continued input in the development of plans. During these meetings, NWSEO officials made it clear that the union would support those proposals which enhance services to the public, but would continue to oppose those plans which would endanger public safety, result in a deterioration of forecast quality, or jeopardize the jobs of NWS employees.

Representatives of NWS and NWSEO met in Florida on December 13, at which time the NWS invited the union to appoint a representative to a team which will be appointed to study and make recommendations on staffing. NWS also promised to keep NWSEO Executive Vice President, Dan Sobien, briefed continually on the work of a management team that will be appointed to coordinate implementation of those Tiger Team recommendations that are ultimately approved by the Corporate Board. Mr. Sobien will become President of NWSEO in January upon the retirement of Paul Greaves.

Mr. Sobien and NWSEO’s representative to the Aviation Tiger Team, Chip Kasper (WFO Key West), also met with NWS Director Johnson on December 20 in Washington to make clear the union’s opposition to the core of the Aviation Tiger Team’s recommendations.

NWSEO ANALYSIS OF FINAL REPORT OF AVIATION “TIGER TEAM”

For the following reasons, NWSEO believes that the recommendations of the Aviation Tiger Team will endanger the safety of civilian aviation and must be rejected:

- P** If the Tiger Team’s recommendations are implemented, air traffic controllers at ARTCCs will no longer have the immediate expertise of an on-site meteorologist to advise them about where to route aircraft experiencing difficulty, when weather conditions play a critical role in that decision. The ARTCCs will be relegated to obtaining their weather briefings and emergency guidance via video teleconferencing set up for access to a remotely located meteorologist. Barring any communication problems, valuable time will be lost while initiating a teleconference, not to mention the time the meteorologist will need to familiarize him with a weather situation that is affecting only a portion of a vast area of responsibility.
- R** The Traffic Management Unit (TMU) within most ARTCCs and associated TRACONs will no longer have immediate access to meteorologists long experienced with unique weather situations affecting that particular airspace. This will diminish air space traffic capacity.
- R** FAA facilities personnel at ARTCCs will not have immediate meteorological assistance in making timely decisions for critical operations such as use of emergency generators; nor will they be able to effectively plan for normal radar maintenance outages. They will no longer be able to consult with the meteorologists for interpretation of questionable or anomalous radar returns due to atmospheric conditions.
- R** The National Transportation Safety Board withheld its support of the FAA’s earlier proposal to close the CWSUs for the same reasons. In a January 20, 2004 letter, the NTSB’s Director of Office of Aviation Safety wrote that “the loss of CWSU staffing at the majority of ARTCCs, the lack of face-to-face interaction between meteorologists and controllers, and the potential for deficiencies in the timeliness of information dissemination during critical events could negatively impact safety.”
- P** The consolidation of TAF preparation will result in a deterioration of the quality and timeliness of these forecasts.

- R** It has been proven that the quality of forecasts degrades the greater the distance the forecaster is from the community for which he or she is forecasting. Roebber, Bosart and Forbes, *Does Distance from the Forecast Site Affect Skill?*, 11 WEATHER AND FORECASTING, 582-590 (Amer. Meteorological Society, 1996). The ATWO forecaster will not have the same expertise in local climatological effects as the WFO forecaster and she/he will be responsible for issuing forecasts for multiple climatological regimes.
- R** Forecasters at an ATWO will be assigned responsibility for upwards of one hundred TAFs. This forecaster will be overwhelmed if a regional outbreak of bad weather necessitates immediate amendment of a substantial number of TAFs, especially if she/he is called upon to provide immediate remote briefings for ARTCC personnel on the changing weather conditions.
- R** Presently, there is a shared, distributed responsibility for issuing TAFs and providing meteorological support for the ARTCCs. The stove piped consolidation plan creates a single point of failure for aviation weather service - either through work overload or communications, hardware or facilities failure - that will have catastrophic affects.
- R** The recommendations of the Aviation Tiger Team are antithetical to the philosophy on which the recommendations of the Concept of Operations Team are based. The CONOPS team has recommended an operations model where workload can be distributed to other offices during high impact events. There is no backup or redundancy to the ATWO operations during high impact events.
- P** The consolidation of the aviation forecasting responsibilities currently performed by the WFOs violates the intent, if not the letter, of the FY 2006 Commerce Appropriations Conference Report, in which Congress clearly indicated that it disapproves of any consolidation of forecasting responsibilities.
- R** The Conference Report states: “The conferees direct that no funds shall be used to implement a plan to consolidate, regionalize, or reduce service hours at weather service forecast offices.”

- P** The consolidation of terminal aviation forecasting will *not* result in any personnel savings and *may* result in conflicting forecasts.
- R** The TAFs are currently prepared and amended by the WFO forecaster assigned to short term forecasts on any particular shift. The preparation of the TAF is an incremental effort that is part and parcel of the short term forecasting process. The short term forecaster at the WFO will still need to look at ceilings, boundary layer winds, surface winds and visibilities while preparing other forecasts. It will not be possible to reduce the number of forecasters on a particular shift at the WFOs if TAF preparation is assigned to the ATWO because TAF preparation represents significantly less than half of the duties of the short term forecaster on each shift.
- R** Because the WFO will still be responsible for forecasts for the same period and geographic area that includes the aviation terminals, there is a high potential for the WFO and the ATWOs to issue inconsistent forecasts.
- P** The proposed test prototype of the ATWO TAF production process will be a scientifically invalid test.
- R** The Tiger Team proposes that four forecasters be assigned to the prototype ATWO to test the TAF preparation process. Since forecaster experience, speed and skill is highly variable, this is too small a number of individuals on which to base any judgment as to the quality of remotely prepared TAFs and how many TAFs can be generated by a given forecaster as part of a mass production process. There is a high potential for those who seek to validate the proposal to “cherry pick” forecasters for this test. A substantially larger number of forecasters must be used for a valid test and their selection must be randomized.
- R** The TAFs issued by the prototype ATWO will be compared to those issued in “the traditional WFO setting.” However, the proposed test methodology will not be valid because it will only be a *single blind*, and not a *double blind* study. Under the Tiger Team’s proposal, the “WFO forecasters will not know which of their terminal forecasts are being prototyped” by the ATWO, but, of course, the ATWO forecasters will know that all their TAFs are part of the comparison. Thus, the ATWO forecasters will have the incentive to maximize effort and the WFO forecasters will not. This will produce skewed results. Furthermore, as noted above, the WFO forecasters

who produce the TAFs used for comparison will be randomized, while the prototype ATWO forecasters will presumably be selected for their skill and support of the concept that the NWS seeks to validate.

- P** The projected timeline for ATWO prototype testing does not take into account the NWS' pre-implementation bargaining obligations. It may realistically take two years or longer before the ATWO prototype can be tested.

- R** The Tiger Team has recommended that selection and training of prototype ATWO forecasters will begin in February and March of 2006, and that the prototype ATWO test begin during the spring, 2006 convective season. This proposal has ignored the NWS' responsibility to engage in "impact and implementation" negotiations with NWSEO prior to the selection and training process, and negotiations over the work schedule at the prototype ATWO prior to operations.

- R** The procedures for selection of bargaining unit ATWO forecasters are substantively negotiable under 5 U.S.C. § 7106(b)(2) as is any "alternative work schedule" proposed by the union for forecasters assigned to the prototype ATWO. Other impacts on unit employees involved in the demonstration project are also subject to bargaining.

- R** There are no ground rules yet in place for such bargaining, and negotiations for such ground rules must be conducted even before substantive negotiations over NWSEO's proposals begin. Under law and the parties' collective bargaining agreement, the prototype ATWO may not go into operation until a final agreement is reached. This may involve legal proceedings before the Federal Service Impasses Panel in the event that negotiations fail to produce a voluntary agreement.