



*The Four Winds*

National Weather Service Employees Organization

October 2006

## *The Enigmatic Corporate Board*

One can spend a lot of time just trying to figure out just why the Corporate Board is so bent on consolidating services. The drive for consolidation dates back prior to when Tiger Teams were created to address Information Technology, Aviation Services and Weather Forecast Office operations. While the recommendations of the Information Technology team may ultimately lead to consolidation, the recommendations from the remaining teams threaten to undermine the very existence of the National Weather Service as we know it.

The Corporate Board has steadfastly pursued an option which heads towards the reduction in staffing at Weather Forecast Offices and potentially down the road at National Centers. This started with the Nested Office Concept, but the Corporate Board proved unable to sell this idea and Congress added language blocking funds from being spent on such consolidations. However, soon thereafter, we were presented with a new CONOPS which is in essence the Nested Office Concept sans the large scale spin down of staffing at WFOs. While the current ideas only call for small scale staffing reductions at some, but not all offices, it sets the stage for much further reductions and consolidated services. For Aviation Services, the Corporate Board recently voted to consolidate the Center Weather Service Units into adjacent Weather Forecast Offices despite a spectacular failure of the test office.

The Corporate Board has repeatedly cited how 67% of the NWS budget pays for labor costs; it is clearly driven to consolidate services to reduce those labor costs. This is being done without regard for the potential negative impacts on aviation safety or the general safety of the American Public which will be affected by having less staff to monitor weather. The old adage of not being able to see the forest for the trees seems rather appropriate. It is this fact that underscores why the actions of the Corporate Board can be labeled as an enigma, which the *Random House College Dictionary* defines as “a puzzling or inexplicable occurrence or situation.”

The Corporate Board frequently cites that our labor budget is high compared to other government organizations. What the Corporate Board doesn't see is that we aren't like other government organizations! The NWSEO finds this to be flawed logic for a number of reasons. First, these critics are using a model for the ratio of personnel vs. other expenses based upon a Monday through Friday, 9 to 5 office. Perhaps the Department of Labor, the Department of Agriculture, or the Office of Personnel Management has a lower percentage of budgetary expenses for employee salaries. To our knowledge, those offices, as important as they are, are closed evenings and holidays.

In the NWS, by 4:00 pm, two thirds of our workforce hasn't reported for duty yet. In municipalities, the fire and police department have a higher percentage of budget for labor than the personnel department or the DMV. That would be because when there is an accident or a fire at 3:00 am, you want fire and policemen on duty to answer the call.

Shift workers have the equivalent of "hot bunking" – they share desks, workspaces, work stations, PCs, supercomputers, telephones, and phone services. This makes non-labor expenses lower, so labor is a higher proportion of the budget. An office of 25 employees won't have 25 phones, 25 PCs, 25 cubicles, 25 printers, bookshelves, calendars, directories, etc. In other words, labor costs in the NWS are not high; rather the cost of the shared infrastructure is low. So if you are just looking at the ratio of labor to infrastructure, you are looking at a skewed picture.

Commerce and transportation, which run the U.S. economy, includes airplanes, ships, farmers, trains, fire fighters, disaster managers, truckers, not to mention the general public; all of whom expect answers to their weather concerns. We answer these with forecasts, watches, warnings, gridded data, and all hazards weather radio. For \$13 per family per year, we give them their one hundred nine dollars worth.\* That is a good return on investment. Show me another 13 dollar investment which will yield \$109! The people of the United States demand excellence 24/7, and our WFOs, CWSUs, RFCs and national centers deliver it with aplomb.

\*Economic Statistics for NOAA, April 2006, 5<sup>th</sup> ed.

For the future of the National Weather Service, an agency that has for over 130 years survived more than its share of attacks from the budgetary pen, we must be vigilant to ensure the survival of this agency not only for our own careers, but for maintaining the current levels of forecast warnings and advisories provided today.