
**Testimony of Richard J. Hirn
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Submitted to the Subcommittee on Science, State, Judiciary, Commerce
and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
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NWSEO is pleased to have this opportunity to submit testimony on the Administration's fiscal year 2006 budget request for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Regrettably, the amount requested for National Weather Service Operations, Research and Facilities (\$652.2 million) is insufficient to restore cuts in services recently made by the National Weather Service as a result of the FY '05 \$37 million shortfall. The NWS anticipates that its operational shortfall for FY'06 will be \$40 million if the President's request is enacted without change. This will result in further reductions in personnel and services that will endanger public safety and delay implementation of new science and technology that could save lives.

The FY '05 shortfall was created when Congress reduced the NWS' appropriations for operations and research by \$14 million below FY '04 levels and \$40 million below the President's FY '05 request. The NWS was the *only* NOAA line organization whose budget was slashed by the Congress in the FY '05 Omnibus Appropriations Act; every other NOAA agency received a funding increase.

During the March 10, 2005 hearing on NOAA's budget request, Under Secretary Lautenbacher assured the Subcommittee that the reductions in the NWS's budget this fiscal year were accommodated by cutting programs that did not affect the ability of the NWS to protect the public. *However, Admiral Lautenbacher candidly admitted that, although there was ostensibly no degradation this year, "I don't know about the future."*

NWSEO is not as sanguine about the impact of this year's budget cuts on the ability of the NWS to carry out its critical safety mission. Among the steps the NWS has taken as a result of the reduction in FY '05 has been a hiring freeze at NWS headquarters and leaving positions in the field vacant for longer periods. NWS Director D.L. Johnson told agency employees in a January issue of the NWS' newsletter that the FY '05 reduction "will create a labor lapse where

it may take up to one-third longer to fill a vacancy than usual and may adversely impact field operations, especially during severe weather.” Other cuts made this year include:

- R** reduction in training by \$1.5 million.
- R** delays in improvements to NEXRAD radar, which will reduce the capability to utilize high resolution radar data in new computer models. Such improvements would have increased severe weather and winter storm warning lead times.
- R** delays in implementation of new software used for forecasting.
- R** elimination of “narrowbanding” kits that would prevent radiofrequency interference with first responder frequencies that lead to the shut down of transmission of rain and stream gauge data critical to flash flood warnings.
- R** deferral of acquisition of NOAA Weather Radio transmitter spares, resulting in increased downtime of 400 transmitters, thereby affecting the ability to warn the public of severe weather.
- R** delays in development and testing of short range quantitative precipitation forecasts which, if implemented, would reduce flash flood warning lead time.
- R** delays in development and deployment of new Ceilometers, which measure cloud height and cloud cover. This delay jeopardizes aviation safety because there is no vendor support for current Ceilometers beyond FY ‘07.

Although the President has requested a \$35 million increase over the FY ‘05 appropriation of \$617 million for National Weather Service operations and research, the requested increase does not remedy the growing structural operational deficit that is the result of cumulative unfunded pay raises and other mandatory costs, totaling \$ 56 million in FY ‘05:

- R** \$18 million of the increase is sought to fund new programs and responsibilities, such as improvements in the Tsunami warning program (\$6 million), water resources forecasting (\$4 million) and ozone air quality forecasting (\$2 million).
- R** an additional \$30 million is sought for “adjustments to base” and to fund transfers to the NWS of programs from other NOAA agencies (\$11 million).
- R** \$13 million of the increase of \$48 million (\$18 million for new programs and \$30 million for ATBs) is offset by proposed terminations - leaving an overall increase of \$35 million.

Unless \$40 million is added to the NWS' ORF line, additional reductions in operational services will be made in FY '06. According to NWS management, only \$20 million of the \$37 million in reductions made in FY '05 can be continued in FY '06. Additional critical programs will have to be made in FY '06 in order to absorb the other \$20 million operating shortfall, such as a reduction of weather balloon launches by 25%. The NWS' Corporate Board is already considering a proposal to consolidate forecast offices and to reduce a number of forecast offices which operate 24 hours a day. Last month, the NWS Corporate Board held a three day meeting in Kansas City to discuss this.

All of NOAA's programs are important for the Nation's long term environmental assessment and protection. However, within NOAA, the National Weather Service's programs are *critical* to the *immediate* protection of the Nation's public safety, transportation and commerce. The amount appropriated each year for NOAA to distribute in grant money to the private sector (approximately \$975 million) is more than is annually appropriated for the entire National Weather Service. There is simply no point in funding private research into atmospheric science if there is insufficient funding to implement the results of that research in the operational environment of the National Weather Service. The Subcommittee should make full funding of the National Weather Service as the first priority in NOAA's FY '06 budget.

The Administration's budget request also contains two changes in existing law which should be rejected:

Name Change Authority

Section 605(a) of Title VI - General Provisions - currently requires the Department of Commerce to notify the Committees on Appropriations in advance of any reprogramming which, *inter alia*, creates, eliminates, renames or reorganizes any programs or activities. The Administration has requested that the Committee delete the existing requirement to notify Congress of the renaming of any office. DOC is seeking stealth authority to change the name of the National Weather Service, despite objections from Members of this Subcommittee. NOAA has circulated plans to rename the National Weather Service as "NOAA's Weather Service" and earlier this year renamed the National Weather Service as "NOAA's National Weather Service." A directive, soon to be issued by NOAA, will prohibit display of the NWS logo and will require additional unjustified expenses such as replacing existing signage within three years. This directive will also prohibit employees from wearing NWS logo apparel.

Senior NWS managers have strongly objected to either renaming because of the cost and the confusion that would be created when "NOAA's Weather Service" issues forecasts and severe storm warnings. The NWS Pacific Regional Director has written to NWS headquarters that:

“I wonder if the cost, in today's fiscal environment, of changing the name of every NOAA activity on letterhead, buildings, signs, etc., is worth it. The line offices have spent considerable resources in doing films and developing PR materials, they will all have to be changed - at considerable cost. I don't believe the costs are worth it considering the gain - nothing. If we do do it, I hope NOAA programs the money instead of having the line offices carve it out of their budgets.”

The Director of NWS' Office of Strategic Planning and Policy objected to the name change based on his well grounded fear that the name change would jeopardize public safety as well as for financial reasons:

“Our warning products are typically referred to in the following form: “The National Weather Service has issued a tornado warning for upper Green County.” Will the change to the form “The NOAA Weather Service has issued a tornado warning ...” confuse the public? With the name “National Weather Service” identified as a trusted source for warnings of tornados, floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, winter storms, etc. the question is whether this public trust can be effectively transferred to another name. Confusion over warning information tends to translate into delay in acting on the warning, which could have deadly consequences.”

“The name “National Weather Service” appears in many places: web sites; policy documents; stationary; signs attached to our vehicles, buildings, and other facilities; software which formats our products and which our customers use to recognize our products; and no doubt others. Changing these names to “NOAA Weather Service” will be disruptive and will cost real money. Has anyone estimated these expenses? Who will pay for them? Is the value of this change worth the cost?”

Pay Banding Authority

DOC has inserted language under “NOAA - General and special funds - Operations, Research and Facilities” which would permit NOAA to expand the so-called “personnel management demonstration project” authorized by 5 U.S.C. § 4703 from 3,500 to 6,925 employees. This “demonstration project,” also know as “pay banding,” is a controversial experiment in which employees are excluded from the General Schedule pay scales and ostensibly compensated based on their individual job performance. However laudable such a goal might be, studies conducted for NOAA by Booz Hamilton on the impact of pay banding on the NOAA employees who are already under pay banding demonstrate that there is a very limited correlation between employees' performance rating and their annual pay increase.

The appropriations process is an inappropriate way for NOAA to seek authority to expand pay banding. The proposed language would lift the cap on the number of employees who may be covered in a demonstration project that is imposed by 5 U.S.C. § 4703. The issue presented by this requested change is beyond the jurisdiction of this Committee. This is an issue solely of Federal employee personnel law which falls under the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization of the Committee on Government Reform.

The employees of the National Weather Service and the other NOAA employees our organization represents thank the Subcommittee for considering their views and for its continued support for the National Weather Service and the many other important programs within NOAA.