

Opening Statement

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Subcommittee on Environment,
House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

“Exploring Commercial Opportunities to Maximize Earth Science Investments”

November 17, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today. Chairman Bridenstine and I have held a number of thoughtful and engaging hearings examining how NOAA can advance the role of the commercial sector in providing critical weather data to our national weather enterprise. We have discussed potential challenges and opportunities with numerous representatives of the weather community, and with Vice Admiral Manson Brown, the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Environmental Observation and Prediction.

The message has been consistent: there are great opportunities to engage the commercial sector in ways to supplement NOAA’s observational mission, but we must maintain the core policies, namely free and open access to data, that have allowed our scientific community and the American weather industry to

drive innovation and economic growth. Our critical weather data must remain reliable, and of the highest quality to protect the lives and livelihoods of millions around the world.

In September, NOAA released its Draft Commercial Space Policy, which outlines the policies and guidelines for how the Agency will engage the commercial sector. Most importantly, NOAA reaffirms its commitment to adhere to the policy and practice of full, open, and free data exchange as established by current laws and policies to maintain a “system of reciprocity for global data.” A system of reciprocity that means NOAA receives three times the amount of data it contributes—improving forecasts and reducing costs.

I am pleased that NOAA appears to be on the right path to improve engagement with its commercial partners, and I’m looking forward to reviewing the final policy, which I understand will be released in the coming weeks.

NOAA has an operational mission, and their data and information are considered public goods. NASA serves a research mission with different challenges and opportunities to engage the commercial sector. So although there may be an

opportunity for NASA to adopt some of NOAA's commercial policies, there are important distinctions that require careful consideration.

A common challenge both agencies face is ensuring that data purchased from commercial sources can be shared without significant restrictions. For the most part, the unrestricted access to weather data has been the foundation of the current billion dollar commercial weather industry, an industry that is the best in the world. It is very likely that data purchased by NASA can be shared in a way to further stimulate future commercial ventures. At the same time, a gap in data continuity in NASA's Earth observations could have serious and detrimental effects on our research enterprise and our understanding of the climate.

Both NOAA and NASA are well aware that existing partnerships with private companies carry risks, such as delays in production, launch failures, and cost overruns. For NOAA, any commercial policy that provides critical observational data for weather predictions must consider these factors, as well as the risk to the lives of millions of people across the country. NASA faces similar challenges when developing its path

forward to engage its commercial partners, if not on the same scale.

Mr. Chairman, again I am pleased that we are having this hearing, not only to recognize the positive direction NOAA is taking to engage commercial parties, but also to identify common ground for NASA to adopt into its own commercial policies. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and I yield back the balance of my time.