

OPENING STATEMENT
Ranking Member Don Beyer

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Environment &
Subcommittee on Oversight
“An Overview of the Nation’s Weather Satellite Programs and Policies”
December 10, 2015

Thank you, Chairman Bridenstine and Chairman Loudermilk for holding today’s hearing. I’d also like to extend a thank you and welcome to our witnesses this morning. As has been stated by my colleagues, the goal of the Committee’s oversight in this area is simple. It is to ensure that both the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS) and the Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites (GOES) are technically sound and operationally robust when they are completed, which we all hope is as expeditiously as possible. As satellites that have a critical role in weather forecasting, losing coverage of either system could have serious, perhaps catastrophic effects on public safety.

Unfortunately, NOAA’s development of both of these weather satellite systems has had a rocky path—they have been plagued by cost growth, poor schedule performance, technical issues and management challenges.

During the Subcommittees’ hearing on these projects in February it seemed that J-P-S-S was the more troubled of the two acquisitions.

However, the launch of GOES-R has now been delayed by more than 6 months and it appears that the new October 2016 launch date is still at risk.

The ongoing delays on these programs increase the cost of these satellites, distort NOAA’s budget, and limit the agency’s resources for weather forecasting and important research into weather, oceans, and climate science.

Satellite acquisition is no easy task and these problems are not unique to NOAA. They routinely occur in the development of satellite programs by the Department of Defense and the U.S. intelligence community. But that is not an excuse.

I believe that NOAA recognizes that this is an unsustainable model, and that going forward the agency will need to find a more efficient and more reliable means of putting its instruments on orbit.

Shifting back to the work conducted by Mr. Powner and his team at GAO, it is my understanding that since 2012 they have issued 23 recommendations to NOAA that they believe will strengthen

the agency's acquisition efforts and improve their contingency planning. To date, just 6 of these recommendations have been implemented. I'm interested in learning more today about these remaining recommendations and NOAA's progress in addressing them.

Additionally, I think it is important for Congress and this Committee to have a clear understanding of NOAA's policies and planning as it relates to these critical satellite programs. As will likely be discussed in more detail today, NOAA's decision to change the expected lifespan of its weather satellites needs to be transparent and clearly documented.

NOAA's satellites also provide the data necessary for our weather models and the critical forecasting and warning products and services provided by the National Weather Service. In fact, the capabilities of the National Weather Service are directly dependent on the quality and success of our satellite programs as well as a highly-skilled workforce. And while not the focus of today's hearing, I want to mention some important work GAO is conducting on behalf of me, and my colleagues, Ms. Bonamici and Mr. Lipinski. Specifically, we've been concerned about the number of vacancies that currently exist in the National Weather Service's field offices and we've asked GAO to review present and future staffing levels in order to support the agency's efforts to evolve its operational components and to increase its decision support services. Ensuring an adequate workforce is also central to achieving NOAA's public safety mission.

We cannot afford a weather satellite gap and it is essential that NOAA keep these programs on track.

I know these are both technically difficult and critically important issues that NOAA needs to address. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I look forward to hearing from both our NOAA and GAO witness today.