Statement by the Honorable Dan Maffei (D-NY)
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight

Mr. Chairman, the weather satellites we fly over the poles and in geostationary orbits over the East and West coasts provide essential data for weather forecasting.

Both the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS) and the Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite (GOES-R) are essential acquisition programs intended to put replacements on-orbit for the current generation of operating satellites. Unfortunately, both these acquisitions have been troubled.

Of the two, JPSS is far and away in the most trouble, and will produce a definite gap in coverage due to the technical and cost challenges which have plagued the program. GOES-R is also worrisome, with an ongoing possibility of a data gap emerging due to schedule slips.

None of us are happy about this. However, it has been suggested that somehow the problems in these programs are tied to the costs of climate science. This is just not the case.

When the Obama Administration took office, they inherited a crippled program that lacked all the planning and management guidance necessary to move forward. It had experienced cost growth from $6.5 billion to at least $12.5 billion. For almost 100 percent cost growth we were getting two satellites instead of six and we had jettisoned many sensors. The Administration inherited hard decisions about how to move the program forward and it took almost two years to get DOD out of the program and NOAA and NASA on a fresh path.

Any objective observer would have to conclude that the restructured JPSS program is better managed and better structured now than it was in 2008. There are still gaps in the management tools need in JPSS, but compared to where we were in 2005 through 2008, the bleeding has stopped and the slips seem relatively small.

That said, we are facing an inevitable gap in coverage. While that cannot be laid at the feet of this Administration, we can ask of the Administration whether they have put necessary resources into settling on a valid gap-filler strategy. Have they identified other sources of data? Do they have all agreements in place to insure they have unbroken access to that data? What steps have been taken to validate the effects of that data on our modeling to insure that we minimize impacts on forecast accuracy? These are crucial questions that I would like to see answered today.

As to GOES-R, that program has always been a little healthier than JPSS. It has suffered from fewer technical issues and less relative cost growth, and enjoyed more stable management than the polar program. That said, there is still a chance that a gap in

coverage could emerge and that would be tragic. NOAA has to keep on track to get us satellites on orbit and working before the current GOES satellites go dark. The recent slip narrows the margin for error and is a cause for concern among all of us.

We need satellites ready for launch to avoid or limit coverage gaps. We need clear plans for alternative sources of data to protect forecasting accuracy. We need confidence that both these programs are going to succeed, even by the diminished expectations we now hold for them.