

OPENING STATEMENT

Ranking Member Don Beyer (D-VA)
Subcommittee on Oversight
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Joint Subcommittee Hearing:
Bridging the Gap: America's Weather Satellites and Weather Forecasting

February 12, 2015

I want to associate myself with the comments from my colleague, Ranking Member Bonamici, in welcoming everyone. I am told that historically, this Committee has been a haven of bipartisanship. In the area of oversight, I hope that we can work together to improve the quality of government services and protect taxpayer interests. I am looking forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

NOAA has had a rocky acquisition with the new series of weather satellites. The Polar Orbiting satellites have been particularly troubled. The costs have doubled. More money is buying just two satellites instead of the original intention to acquire six satellites. The satellites that fly will be less capable, with instruments reduced from 13 to just 5. Finally, the satellites are years behind schedule. By comparison, the Geostationary satellites are models of efficiency, but they have had trouble too with cost growth in some areas and delays.

As satellites that have a critical role in weather forecasting, losing coverage of either system could have serious, perhaps catastrophic effects on public safety. Both the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS) and the Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites (GOES) face a possibility of a gap in coverage—with the risks on JPSS being so high that a gap appears to be almost unavoidable. At this point, the only way to avoid such a gap is to be very, very lucky. Luck is not a plan, and bad luck is as probable as good luck.

The cost of these satellites distorts NOAA's budget, and limits the agency's resources for weather forecasting and important research into weather, oceans and climate science. Surely NOAA understands that the JPSS program represents a failure and an unsustainable model. Going forward the agency has to find a more efficient, more reliable means to put its instruments on orbit.

GAO has been working with this Committee on these satellite programs for ten years. Without their expert and committed assistance, the Congress and the public would know far less about the risks in these programs. Every GAO product, and team, has to be measured on its own terms. The group that has worked on the satellites system is among the best this Committee has ever worked with and we are very grateful for your help.

For all the lessons that can be learned from the JPSS and GOES acquisitions, the most important immediate challenge has to be to complete both projects as expeditiously as possible. We must get working satellites on orbit, checked out, and bring their data on-line as quickly as possible. After years of truly worrisome reports, it appears that NOAA and NASA have good management teams in place and the contractors are now delivering as promised. The Committee wants to be helpful and supportive as we reach the last stretch going into launch.

At the same time, the news from GAO that NOAA is not well positioned with data-gap mitigation plans in place is disappointing. This is an issue I want to hear more about and I hope we can leave this hearing with a clear commitment to preparing for what to do should the worst happen.