

OPENING STATEMENT

Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR)
Subcommittee on Environment,
House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

“Advancing Commercial Weather Data: Collaborative Efforts to Improve Forecasts, Part II”
Environment Subcommittee Hearing

July 14, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome Vice Admiral Brown. I’m glad you are here today to discuss NOAA’s perspective on the issue of commercial weather data, and I look forward to discussing both the benefits and challenges associated with advancing the role of the commercial sector in providing this critical weather data to our National weather enterprise.

Several weeks ago, we had the opportunity to hear from representatives of the weather community. They described the positive relationship NOAA has with numerous private entities in the acquisition of commercial weather data. They also described how this data is used to supplement global models and forecasts. Finally, they emphasized the importance of preserving full and open access to core data products that enable the growth of the entire weather enterprise – both private and public. Existing policies have – for the most part – allowed for unrestricted sharing of data and information with the research community, international partners, and commercial entities. This unrestricted access to weather data is the foundation of the current billion dollar commercial weather industry, an industry that is the envy of the world. In fact one of the witnesses stated that “NOAA is the world’s gold standard.”

With this praise also came words of caution. Caution to ensure existing policies that maintain free and open access to essential weather data are not altered. Policies that allow the scientific community and private sector to drive innovation and economic growth, and, most importantly, policies that ensure critical weather data remains reliable, and of highest quality, so the lives and livelihoods of millions around the world are protected.

The current government-owned, commercially-operated structure has served us well; however, even existing partnerships with private companies carry risks, things like delays in production, launch failures, and cost overruns. This is not to say the commercial sector is not ready to take on more responsibility in this area, but it does highlight the simple truth that “space is difficult,” and when it comes to providing critical observational data – the backbone of our numerical weather prediction – we must proceed with care and be certain of the path forward.

As we heard from the panel, a model where the government is solely a purchaser and not a provider of weather data presents a number of unique challenges and raises important questions that must be addressed to preserve the continued stability, credibility, and reliability of the Nation’s weather forecasting capabilities. These include:

How would NOAA freely share the data it purchases from commercial sources?

What effect do our international obligations have on policy considerations for the expanded use of commercial weather data?

If NOAA maintains its policy of free and unrestricted use of data it purchases, will it be forced to purchase data at a premium, or serve as an anchor buyer, that will outweigh the anticipated cost savings?

What data should NOAA purchase from the commercial sector and what, if any, data is so essential that the government should retain control?

These are not simple questions with easy answers, but NOAA must consider these, and others, as they develop policies and practices for the continued purchase and use of commercial data.

We heard in our first hearing that although there are opportunities to advance our current model and thinking, there are also serious risks to consider. Congress must not rush to change a process that has worked so well, and provided such great benefits, without ensuring those successes can continue.

The entire weather enterprise, from NOAA to its industry partners and talented researchers, share the same goal of continually advancing our ability to accurately forecast the weather, save lives, and improve our economy in the process. I look forward to hearing about the work NOAA is doing to identify ways to work more closely with industry to incorporate commercial weather data into its models, products, and services, and continuing the discussion of how we can advance our robust weather industry.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and again thank you to our witness for being here this morning. I yield back the balance of my time.