

OPENING STATEMENT

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Subcommittee on Environment
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Advancing Commercial Weather Data: Collaborative Efforts to Improve Forecasts
Environment Subcommittee Hearing

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you witnesses for being here today. I want to start by congratulating the Chairman for passage of H.R. 1561, the Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act of 2015 on the House floor yesterday. I know he shares my interest in doing all we can to protect the American people from severe weather events, and the legislation we worked on together will go a long way in improving the nation's weather forecasting capabilities.

I am also pleased that we are holding today's hearing to discuss the benefits and challenges associated with advancing the role of commercial weather data in our National weather enterprise. Our legislation takes an important first step toward strengthening and improving NOAA's partnerships with the private sector. However, there are a number of issues that NOAA and this Subcommittee need to work through to achieve the appropriate balance. The complexity of such a transition is why I am glad we are holding today's hearing. As impressive as our witness panel is this morning, however any discussion of this topic is incomplete without also hearing from NOAA. I understand that NOAA was unable to be here today because of time constraints, but Mr. Chairman, I trust that we can find another time to hear directly from NOAA about their current policies and any challenges they see with expanding the purchase and use of commercial weather data. Nevertheless, I am looking forward to this morning's discussion.

As we are exploring a path forward for commercial weather data, it is important for us to first understand the history of the partnership between NOAA and the private sector. It is a long and fruitful partnership. Currently, NOAA procures the Nation's geostationary and polar satellites through contracts with the private sector. This government owned, commercially operated structure has served us well. It has provided critical observational data that is the backbone of our numerical weather prediction and is based on the premise that government information is a valuable resource and a public good. Therefore, the data gathered by these satellites, and used by NOAA, is made available to the public.

The preservation of full and open access to core data products is essential and has enabled the growth of the whole weather enterprise—public and private. Policies that enable the sharing of data and information with the research community, our international partners, and commercial entities, has brought the weather industry to where it is today. This billion dollar industry owes much of its success to these open data policies and I'm concerned about whether and how the industry will continue to grow if we dramatically alter these open access policies.

NOAA also has a history of incorporating commercial weather data into its products and services. For example, we will hear today from a company that provides real-time lightning data

to NOAA, which is essential for its severe weather warnings and forecasts. All of these external data sources are valuable, but they supplement observations from government satellites, they do not replace them.

If we are moving toward a model where the government is solely a purchaser, and not a provider, of weather data then there are a number of unique challenges and important questions that must be addressed to ensure the stability, credibility, and reliability of the Nation's weather forecasting capabilities.

Specifically, can NOAA freely share the data it purchases?

If not, what would that mean for maintaining our international obligations?

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

I could go on, but these are the kinds of questions NOAA has been wrestling with while developing policies and practices for purchasing commercial data over the years. I know they are still working hard to address these questions and others and again, Mr. Chairman I want to emphasize that we need NOAA to be a part of these discussions going forward.

I know everyone involved in the weather enterprise from NOAA to its industry partners to our talented researchers are all working toward the same goal of advancing our ability to forecast the weather, save lives, and improve our economy in the process. As we identify ways for NOAA to work more closely with industry to incorporate commercial weather data into its models, products, and services, we must be mindful of the risks.

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