OPENING STATEMENT

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Subcommittee on Environment
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

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

February 12, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to begin this morning by offering my congratulations to you, Mr. Bridenstine, the new Chairman of the Environment Subcommittee, to our new Oversight Subcommittee Chairman, Mr. Loudermilk (Louder-milk), and to new Oversight ranking member Mr. Beyer. I'd also like to extend a warm welcome to all of the new Subcommittee members. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to serve on the Science Committee and to help shape policies that are critical to the long-term health and prosperity of the nation.

This morning's hearing is a fitting way to undertake our work. Oversight of NOAA's weather satellites has been a long-standing bipartisan effort of this Committee — spanning many Administrations and sessions of Congress. It's my hope that this hearing is just the beginning of a productive and bipartisan working relationship.

Mr. Chairman, I doubt the average American spends much time thinking about the weather satellites managed by NOAA, but I do know one of the first things many of us do each morning is turn on the television or get on the internet or our favorite phone app to read the day's weather forecast. That's because weather is important, affecting everything from our commute to the food on our table. In fact, a 2009 study from the American Meteorological Society stated that U.S. weather forecasts generated $31.5 billion in benefits compared to costs of $5.1 billion.

On this Committee, we have worked on finding ways to improve forecasting to protect the American people and the economy from the impacts of severe weather. I am proud to be working the Chairman on bipartisan legislation, the Weather Forecasting Improvement Act, to advance NOAA's weather research enterprise and improve the products and services offered by the National Weather Service. That effort is important and ongoing.

But meanwhile any loss of coverage from the polar satellites or the geostationary satellites would have very serious consequences regarding the accuracy and timeliness of our weather forecasts and the capabilities of the Weather Service.

Unfortunately, years of trouble and mismanagement in the polar satellite program mean that we will have a gap in coverage within the next decade, with the worst case scenario being a gap lasting more than five years. In addition, there remains a chance that we face a gap in geostationary satellite coverage as well.

I am certain that we will hear from today's witnesses about the significant progress that's been made in this area, and I am pleased that NOAA and NASA are working to get these programs back on track. I applaud you for your efforts, but we are here today to emphasize the importance of maintaining focus on getting these programs where they need to be to protect American people and our economy.

It may be possible to reduce the gap in coverage if there is ptimal performance by our current satellites that enables them to greatly exceed their design lives. Additionally, if JPSS-1 and GOES-R launch on

time, that may reduce the gap in coverage. It's still important, that prudent managers have plans in the event of failure, and it's also critical that any gap mitigation strategy is well developed andready to implement.

Unfortunately, the testimony today from GAO highlights a number of concerns with these contingency plans, specifically with NOAA's plans to respond to the near-term data gap for our polar satellites. The questions for our witnesses today are simple: How can we best minimize the duration and impact of a gap in the polar program? How can we avoid a gap in the geostationary program? And, are plans to fill gaps in coverage appropriately mature, prioritized, and ready to implement?

The American public may not spend much time thinking about where their weather forecasts come from, but they will notice if those forecasts aren't reliable. I'm looking forward to hearing the witnesses from GAO, NOAA, and NASA discuss the agencies' plan of action to address the looming gap in satellite coverage.

I'm also interested in learning how NOAA and NASA are working to ensure that we don't face a similar situation in the future. The President's fiscal year 2016 budget request includes $380 million for a Polar Follow-On program. How will this program make our satellite program more robust? Do we need to rethink or modify the model we use for acquiring weather data?

Mr. Chairman, let me end by again offering my congratulations. I look forward to working with you and the subcommittee on important issues like those we are discussing today. Thank you and I yield back the balance of my time.