

OPENING STATEMENT

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House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Subcommittee on Environment

“An Overview of the Nation’s Weather Satellite Programs and Policies”

December 10, 2015

I’d like to begin by thanking Chairman Bridenstine and Chairman Loudermilk for holding today’s hearing. It’s fitting that we are ending our work this session the same way we began it — by holding a hearing to examine the progress and health of our nation’s weather satellites. Unfortunately, problems remain and progress has been slow.

Oversight of these critical systems and finding ways to improve weather forecasts and warnings that protect the American people and the economy from severe weather are issues on which we can successfully identify common ground. This year we have partnered to advance NOAA’s weather research enterprise through the Weather Forecasting Improvement Act. This bill would improve the products and services offered by the National Weather Service — ultimately saving lives.

But we can’t have accurate and timely weather forecasts unless we have high-quality and continuous data from our polar and geostationary satellites. Any loss of coverage would have very serious consequences on the capabilities of the National Weather Service.

This is important for my constituents and for every American. In fact, Northwest Oregon is currently being inundated with severe rainfall. As of December 9th, areas in the district I represent experienced up to 12 inches of rain in a three-day period. The excessive rainfall has resulted in power outages, school delays, fallen trees, flooding, severe highway damage, and rerouted transit service. I want to thank our hardworking forecasters in the Portland Weather Service Office, first responders, and emergency managers for their work monitoring and mitigating the damages of this severe weather event. These rainstorms emphasize the importance of ensuring there is not a gap in weather data.

Unfortunately, both the geostationary and polar satellite programs, GOES and JPSS, respectively have been marked by schedule delays, significant cost growth, technical performance concerns, and management challenges. And although I would prefer to hear in today’s hearing that the programs are both on track and that the risks of a data gap have been sufficiently mitigated, regrettably that is not the case. Since our last hearing in February, NOAA has announced that they will delay the launch of GOES-

R from March 2016 to October 2016 and a mission critical instrument on JPSS, the Advanced Technology Microwave Sounder, has missed a key milestone — its November delivery date.

These delays are unacceptable. The stakes are too high and I cannot emphasize enough the importance of getting these programs on track to protect the American people and our economy.

We will hear testimony today from Mr. David Powner with the Government Accountability Office. He will identify some of the key risks and challenges that NOAA faces in successfully executing these critical programs, but I want to focus the remainder of my time on two areas that he will discuss in detail and that are important for Congress to consider.

First, in April of this year NOAA adjusted the life expectancy estimates for the current constellation of geostationary and polar satellites. Specifically, NOAA now expects the current geostationary satellites to remain operational for 10 years, not seven years, and that our current polar satellite, Suomi-NPP, will be operational for nine years, not five years. These adjustments in operational lifespan will significantly mitigate or eliminate any potential gap in satellite coverage.

This is a positive development, but we must make sure that these adjustments are realistic and that we remain vigilant in our oversight of NOAA.

Second, the changes to the expected lifespan of our current satellites raises important questions about the best and most cost effective way to structure the timing and development of the next-generation satellites. There is no question that NOAA needs to work expeditiously to launch GOES-R and JPSS-1 as well as GOES-S and JPSS-2, but as we consider the out years it will be important for NOAA to clearly evaluate and document the costs and benefits of various launch scenarios.

Mr. Chairman, I know you share my strong desire to ensure that the American people and industries that rely on this data have the most accurate and timely weather forecasts and warnings. Our capabilities are dependent on a robust constellation of weather satellites and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how we can accomplish that goal.

Thank you and I yield back the balance of my time.