

Floor Statement
Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR)
of Subcommittee on Environment

H.R. 353, the “*Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act of 2017*”
April 4, 2017

I rise in support of H.R. 353, the Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act, which also includes the Tsunami Warning, Education, and Research Act.

The Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act is a product of hard work and negotiation over the past two Congresses. I want to thank Congressman Frank Lucas, Chairman Lamar Smith, and former Environment Subcommittee Chairs Jim Bridenstine and Chris Stewart, who were great partners in getting us here today.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is responsible for important work at the cutting edge of science and public service, and weather forecasting is one of the most critical tasks for our country.

At a time when budget uncertainty jeopardizes some of the most fundamental services NOAA provides to our nation, it is imperative that we support legislation like H.R. 353 to give the agency the resources and flexibility needed to fulfill its mission.

The Northwest Oregon communities I represent, and communities across the country, rely on timely weather forecasts to decide when to harvest their crops, when to go to sea to fish, how to navigate the roads safely when there’s freezing rain or snow, and to prepare for possible flood conditions.

The National Weather Service provides excellent forecasting products to support our economy, but with the increasing frequency and severity of severe weather events, there can be and should be improvements in our forecasting capabilities and delivery.

Improvements in forecasts can provide more lead time to allow communities to prepare, especially in severe weather events. And more effective communication of forecast information to the public and those in harm’s way can reduce the loss of life and property.

This bill connects the research side of NOAA—the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research—more effectively to the forecasting needs of the National Weather Service; cultivating a research-to-operations pipeline that is essential for the continued improvement of our weather forecasting enterprise.

The bill contains several provisions that will improve interactions and information sharing between NOAA’s researchers and the National Weather Service. It improves communication between NOAA and the broader research and private weather communities.

This bill also formally establishes the pilot program currently operating at NOAA to engage in contracts with the commercial sector for weather forecasting data.

Even the best forecasts will not serve the public's needs unless there are effective communication systems in place. H.R. 353 directs NOAA to do more research, listen to experts, and improve its risk communication techniques.

The bill also establishes interagency coordination, through the Office of Science and Technology Policy, across multiple agencies outside NOAA that share responsibilities for weather research and forecast communications. This is essential, and highlights the important role the Office of Science and Technology Policy and NOAA share to help speed the adoption of best tools and practices across the various agencies of the Federal government.

The legislation before us today also includes the Tsunami Warning, Education, and Research Act, legislation I've introduced over the past three Congresses.

The Tsunami Warning, Education, and Research Act seeks to improve our country's understanding of the threat posed by tsunami events by improving forecasting and notification systems, developing supportive technologies, and supporting local community outreach, preparedness, and response plans. This bill helps to address the risk faced by communities on both coasts and in the Gulf of Mexico by improving our mitigation and research program and enhancing community outreach and planning.

Many if not most of my colleagues represent districts that have experienced some kind of natural disaster. The threat of a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami is real because of the Cascadia Subduction Zone. West coast members take this threat very seriously. I have heard from coastal communities, people who fish, the tourism and maritime industries, marine and public safety officials, sheriffs, emergency managers, small business owners, older Americans, and students who are concerned their communities are not prepared for a tsunami.

Students at Seaside High School, a coastal community in my district, engaged in a year-long project to educate Oregonians about the threat a tsunami has on lives and property. Three of the four public schools in Seaside are still located in the tsunami inundation zone. The high school students have practiced their evacuation route, and know that in the projected time between a major earthquake, and the devastating wave of a tsunami, they couldn't make it to higher ground. This is unacceptable.

The University of Oregon and Oregon State University are working on seismic warning systems and tsunami preparedness to help make sure that our communities are prepared and have the best research available to give them the most warning time possible. This bill compliments their work.

I am proud to have worked on this legislation, which is so important to the people in NW Oregon and other coastal communities, but I do remain very concerned that the funding level authorized is below current spending.

This cut would have serious consequences. The operation and maintenance funding for the buoy network we rely on to detect tsunamis could decrease, adding hours of delay in appropriately warning coastal communities. Tsunami Warning Centers in Alaska and Hawaii are likely to see a reduction in staff, resulting in gaps in coverage and creating greater risks because of time delays in sending out accurate warnings, and in some instances not being able to provide adequate warning at all.

Tsunamis are among the most deadly natural disasters. In the past two decades tsunamis have caused the deaths of roughly a quarter million people around the world. These disasters have also caused profound economic damages. The 2011 tsunami in Japan caused more than 200 billion dollars in economic losses. We are fortunate in the United States to have been spared these catastrophes – so far. But our coastlines from the Gulf of Mexico to Alaska are susceptible to the same kind of disasters we've seen in Indonesia and Japan. It's not a matter of "if", it's a matter of "when."

Tsunami program activities protect coastal Oregonians just as hurricane forecasting protects coastal Floridians, Carolinians, and others up the east coast of the United States. It is important that we reauthorize these life-saving activities and just as important to provide the necessary funds to support them.

I will work tirelessly with my colleagues to make sure this program receives the full funding it needs to serve our communities and save lives and property.

Although there are always areas where we can do more, this underlying bill is a good bipartisan agreement and one that I am proud to support while continuing to ask for current levels of funding. I ask my colleagues to vote yes on H.R. 353, Mr. Speaker, and I reserve the balance of my time.

I encourage my colleagues to support this bill that seeks to improve weather forecasting and tsunami preparedness. I yield back the balance of my time.