

OPENING STATEMENT

The Honorable Sandy Adams (R-FL), Vice-Chairman
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

“Mismanagement of Funds at the National Weather Service and the Impact on the Future of Weather Forecasting”

Wednesday, September 12, 2012

Good afternoon and welcome to today’s hearing. As Vice-Chair of the Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee, it is my pleasure to chair the hearing in Dr. Broun’s place.

We are here today to better understand what led to the mismanagement of funds at the National Weather Service. Our first panel will provide insight into how that mismanagement occurred, why there was insufficient oversight by department leaders, how the investigation was conducted and the decisions and corrective actions that NOAA and the Department of Commerce will make going forward.

Our second panel will provide context for how we got in this situation in the first place. We will hear from the National Weather Service Employees Organization about the stresses on labor funding and staffing, as well as the National Academies of Science about their recent report on how to plan, deploy, and oversee future improvements at the Weather Service, specifically the need to integrate advances in science and technology.

Congress’ appreciation of the value of the National Weather Service is evidenced by its financial commitment to it. Since 2007, Congress has exceeded the Administration’s request for the National Weather Service in all but two years, including 2011 when this Congress *had* to move a CR six months into the fiscal year. So when Congress is informed that the Weather Service has been experiencing a budget shortfall for several years, we are understandably concerned. Keeping Congress in the dark while there’s a storm brewing at the agency is at best irresponsible, and at worst dishonest.

We have also been informed that no *“NWS employee committed fraud or received personal financial gain through their actions.”* Yes, I’m glad that no one stole money for personal gain, but make no mistake, Congress’ trust - *my* trust - has been violated. Money designated for programs like the Advanced Weather Interactive Processing System and Weather Radio Improvement Project, important investments in future capabilities, were used to pay for other near-term expenses. Why did the agency decide to ‘rob Peter to pay Paul,’ rather than appropriately prioritizing in the first place? Perhaps the clue lies in the May 24, 2012 decision memo issued by Administrator Lubchenco when she states:

“The NWS operated with an unacceptable lack of transparency relating to budgeting and without mechanisms for staff to air their concerns about budget formulation and execution within NWS, creating an environment of mistrust.”

Then there’s the question of NWS oversight, or lack thereof. The same memo also states that the Investigative Team that reviewed the financial mismanagement issues found:

“failure of management and oversight by NWS leadership. In addition, the Team found significant problems with budget and financial controls at the National Weather Service and that Departmental financial and management controls were ineffective at detecting or preventing this inappropriate reprogramming.”

Yet, despite this admission, NOAA and the Department of Commerce refused to provide an important witness for today’s hearing. NOAA’s Chief of Resources, Operations, and Management (CROM), and former CFO during the events in question, would have been able to provide a historical context for the funding issues the Weather Service faced, a description of the impediments to transparency she experienced as CFO, and a detailed understanding of what NOAA needs to do going forward to fully understand what happened, and how it can be prevented in the future. The Committee was willing to work with NOAA, even going as far as allowing the agency to only submit one piece of written testimony, but NOAA still refused. While I appreciate Dr. Sullivan’s willingness to appear before the Committee, denying the Committee’s request to hear from the person who was the agency’s principal financial manager during a time in which millions of dollars of resources were secretly misallocated is simply unacceptable. This should be embarrassing for an administration that repeatedly declares itself “the most transparent in history.”

The Committee has also requested a number of documents from NOAA - some of which were originally requested months ago. Unfortunately, NOAA has not provided a number of resources that should be readily available. When an agency refuses to provide a witness as well as requested documents, it makes it difficult for us to conduct thorough oversight. It also makes it difficult for us not to ask: what are you hiding?

The Committee will continue to track this issue as NOAA and the Department of Commerce attempt to identify the exact costs and impacts of these transfers, as well as how they plan to prevent it from happening in the future. Unfortunately, as the Commerce IG will mention in his testimony, allegations of similar behavior are still coming in – even as recently as last month. Now, as a former law enforcement officer, I understand that allegations have to be investigated thoroughly, but the simple fact that these complaints are still coming in tells me that NOAA and the Department still have a problem on their hands.

I look forward to all of our witnesses testimony, and thank them for appearing today.