

COMMITTEE ON
**SCIENCE, SPACE, AND
TECHNOLOGY**
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH



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Media Contacts: Zachary Kurz, Laura Crist
(202) 225-6371

Statement of Environment Subcommittee Chairman Jim Bridenstine (R-Okla.)
Bridging the Gap: America's Weather Satellites and Weather Forecasting

Chairman Bridenstine: Good morning and welcome to the first Environment Subcommittee hearing of the 114th Congress. I want to thank the Full Committee Chairman, Lamar Smith, for his continued leadership. I'd like to congratulate Mr. Loudermilk of Georgia for his assignment as the Chairman of the Oversight Subcommittee. Finally, I also want to welcome back the ranking member, Ms. Bonamici of Oregon, with whom I have worked closely during my time in Congress. I look forward to working with you this Congress.

This Committee has held numerous hearings over the years on NOAA's weather satellite programs. Today we continue this oversight by examining the status of NOAA's two primary satellite systems, the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS) and the Geostationary Environmental Operational Satellite System (GOES). These satellites collect vital data that is fed into numerical weather models used by meteorologists to make our forecasts.

These two programs comprise the lion's share of funding for NESDIS, the satellite office at NOAA. In the newly released Fiscal Year 2016 budget request, NESDIS accounts for over \$2 billion dollars, roughly 40% of the NOAA's total budget. Just seven years ago, in 2008, NOAA's budget for satellites was less than \$1 billion and was roughly one-quarter of NOAA's overall spending. The NESDIS budget has grown dramatically over the last decade.

In addition, recent reports from the Government Accountability Office highlight continuing challenges with NOAA's satellite programs. The JPSS program has been plagued with increasing costs and delays, meaning we are probably facing a gap in satellite coverage and data. Estimates of the data gap range from an optimistic 3 months, to possibly 5 years in the worst case scenario outlined by GAO. With a gap, our ability to predict weather would be dramatically degraded, putting lives and property in danger. This is especially important to me, as my home state of Oklahoma is regularly ravaged by tornadoes.

Likewise, the GOES program has also experienced increasing life-cycle costs and project delays. With the first satellite launch now pushed back to March 2016, it is important that the program adhere to its already-delayed schedule to prevent another gap in satellite coverage and data.

Given the criticality of JPSS and GOES to our forecasts, it is imperative we ensure these programs receive the adequate support and oversight to avoid further delays and costs overruns. I hope we can use this hearing to determine how to keep these programs from slipping further and mitigate any possible gaps.

However, the failures of these programs to stay on track so far highlight a recent track record for our satellite programs that is poor, and that the paradigm of owning and operating large monolithic satellites

is broken. To address this problem, we should look to augment our satellite systems through commercial means, just as the Department of Defense and NASA have done. There is a burgeoning commercial industry that has incredible potential to assist us in providing accurate information to protect American lives and property, disaggregate risk, and save the taxpayers' dollars. We need to have the most resilient space-based architecture possible.

Instead of continuing down the path of large government-owned satellites that are prone to cost overruns and delays, we must look outside the box for new methods of providing essential weather data. For example, there are private companies such as PlanetIQ, Spire, GeoOptics, Tempus Global Data and HySpecIQ that have plans to launch constellations of GPS Radio Occultation and Hyperspectral Sounding satellites, two sources of data that can greatly enhance our forecasting ability. Considering options that reduce the burden on massive government satellite systems will allow us to more accurately predict the weather.

It has become increasingly difficult to remain optimistic about the future of U.S. weather forecasting, which currently lags behind the UK, Europe, and Canada in terms of accuracy, when we have satellite programs that are plagued with increasing costs and perpetual delays. The prospect of gaps in satellite data is higher than ever. We need to look for ways to reduce government burdens and eliminate these types of problems while increasing our ability to protect American lives and property.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and yield back the balance of my time.

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