

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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November 20, 2012

Dr. Jane Lubchenco
Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
and NOAA Administrator
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Administrator Lubchenco:

The National Weather Service (NWS) recently terminated the review team that was formed to conduct a service assessment of NWS' performance in forecasting and alerting the public to the potential hazards relative to Hurricane Sandy. The action to terminate the "National Weather Service Sandy Service Assessment Team"¹ occurred mere days after the team was commissioned.

I am concerned by the termination of the Service Assessment team, especially with the uncertainty of what may or may not occur next. It has been reported that NWS "is waiting to see if there is going to be a broader government review before proceeding with its own assessment."²

I hope this will not be a long wait. According to the NWS website, "NWS conducts Service Assessments to evaluate its performance after significant hydrometeorological, oceanographic, or geological events."³ Further, "Assessment teams, composed of experts from within and outside the NWS, evaluate activities before, during, and after events to determine the usefulness of NWS products and services."⁴

It is imperative that NWS act quickly and decisively in performing an assessment. With each passing day, the next Service Assessment team may experience increased challenges in collecting the information it needs for a comprehensive report. In the meantime, I would

¹ "Hurricane Sandy NWS Assessment Terminated," Mike Smith Enterprises Blog, November 15, 2012, available at: <http://meteorologicalmusings.blogspot.com/2012/11/hurricane-sandy-nws-assessment.html>; (hereinafter Mike Smith Blog).

² Andrew Freedman, "Weather Service Halts Review of its Work During Sandy," Climatecentral.org, November 16, 2012, available at: <http://www.climatecentral.org/news/weather-service-cancels-review-of-performance-during-hurricane-sandy-15252>.

³ NOAA Website, NWS Office of Climate, Water, and Weather Services, "Service Assessments," available at: <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/assessments/index.shtml>.

⁴ Ibid.

appreciate responses to the following questions in order to clarify NWS' intent regarding a Service Assessment for Hurricane Sandy:

- 1) Why was the National Weather Service Sandy Service Assessment Team terminated just days after being commissioned?
- 2) Have any other Service Assessment teams in NWS' history ever been terminated prior to completion of their task?
 - a) If yes, please provide a list of all the times this has occurred, including the timeframe in which they occurred, the reasons for their termination, and the results. For example, were new teams created or were there no Service Assessments for those weather events?
- 3) What was the budget and schedule (when the assessment was to be completed) for the recently decommissioned Hurricane Sandy Service Assessment team?
 - a) How did the budget and timeframe of the Hurricane Sandy Service Assessment team compare with those of other NWS Service Assessments?
 - b) Please explain any discrepancies, if any, between this proposed - and terminated - Service Assessment, compared to other NWS Service Assessments.
- 4) In the termination e-mail sent to members of the National Weather Service Sandy Service Assessment Team at 9:46 am on November 15, 2012, the NWS personnel indicated that, "We have been informed that a larger, multi-agency review of this event may take place."⁵
 - a) Who informed NWS of such a possibility?
 - b) Why is such a possibility being considered?
 - c) Have there ever been any prior "larger, multi-agency" reviews of the NWS' performance in response to a weather-related event? If yes, please provide all pertinent details relative to the reviews, including the reasons such reviews were conducted, whether such reviews replaced the typical NWS service assessments, and the conclusions that were reached.
- 5) When will the decision be made whether or not to proceed with a new Assessment team for Hurricane Sandy?
 - a) Who will make that decision?
 - b) Who would lead a new Assessment team?
 - c) When would a new Assessment team report its findings?
- 6) Will the new Assessment team maintain the same level of independence as the recently decommissioned team, which selected a co-chair from the private sector?
 - a) If not, why not?

⁵ Mike Smith Blog, *supra*, note 1.

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- b) Would a new Assessment team address the five issues and topics detailed in the original Assessment team charter to ensure complete identification and review of potential service deficiencies?
 - c) Would a new Assessment team be prevented from addressing certain issues, or would it be free to conduct an independent review?
 - d) Would a new Assessment team be allowed access to all information and records as it deems necessary?
 - e) Would a new Assessment team be allowed to access and interview all NOAA staff, including those at the National Hurricane Center in Florida?
- 7) Would a new Assessment also go beyond evaluating the NWS' performance and review how risks were communicated by other federal, state, and local entities?
- 8) Would a new Assessment team be comprised of a broad range of federal as well as private sector individuals?

I look forward to your prompt reply to my questions, but please ensure I receive your responses no later than December 14, 2012. If your staff has any questions about this inquiry, please direct them to contact Mr. Raj Bharwani with the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight at 202-225-6371.

Sincerely,



Rep. Paul Brown, MD
Chairman
Subcommittee on Investigations
and Oversight

cc: Rep. Paul Tonko, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
Dr. Rebecca Blank, Acting Secretary, Department of Commerce
Mr. Todd J. Zinser, Inspector General, Department of Commerce