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Lamar Smith, Chairman

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Statement of Environment Subcommittee Chairman Jim Bridenstine (R-Okla.)
Examining the Nation's Current and Next Generation Weather Satellite Programs

Chairman Bridenstine: Good morning and welcome to this morning's Environment Subcommittee hearing entitled "Examining the Nation's Current and Next Generation Weather Satellite Programs." I'd like to first thank our witnesses for being here today.

This Committee has a longstanding interest in the weather satellite programs of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, as evidenced by our continued oversight of these programs spanning multiple Congresses. I am also pleased to have the Department of Defense here today to discuss their weather satellite missions and the cooperation between the DOD and NOAA that result in expert forecasts that save lives and property.

After the National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS) partnership failed to curb costs or yield benefits, the Administration directed NOAA and the DOD to develop individual polar orbiting weather satellite programs. This has come to fruition with NOAA's Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS), the first of which is slated to launch in March of 2017. Given that we are currently relying on the experimental-turned-operational Suomi-NPP, it is my hope that this program suffers no further delays, and this launch date is met. There has been improvement in the JPSS program over the past few years, but there are still potential causes of concern which we will explore today.

Meanwhile, the DOD began its own weather satellite program, the Defense Weather Satellite System (DWSS). However, this plan was scrapped in 2012, and the Department is now planning a new next generation program called the Weather System Follow-On (WSF).

In the meantime, the DOD currently relies on its existing satellite system, the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP).

These DOD satellites, much like NOAA's existing fleet, are ageing rapidly. One of them, DMSP-19, failed earlier this year, increasing the fragility of the system. The possibility of data gaps looms large as both agencies look to create a more robust satellite architecture.

Further complicating these issues is the reliance the agencies place on themselves and our international partners for critical weather data. For polar orbiting satellite

data, there are three primary orbits. The early-morning orbit is operated by the DOD, the mid-morning orbit by EUMETSAT's MetOp program, our partnering satellite agency in Europe, and the early-afternoon orbit by NOAA. Eighty percent of the data that goes into our numerical weather models comes from polar-orbiting satellites. Since we rely so heavily on these satellites, it is important for these orbits to continually be filled.

While these government satellites systems play an important role in providing data that predicts weather, I also want to highlight the growing role of the private sector. Let me be absolutely clear: I am in no way suggesting the privatization of NOAA. However, the advancements of the commercial weather satellite industry has real potential to improve our forecasting capabilities, as well as provide gap mitigation in the event one of our satellites suffers a failure or further delays.

NOAA has released a Commercial Space Policy, a draft of its Commercial Space Activities Assessment process, and is currently operating a commercial weather data pilot program to test and validate private sector data for integration into its numerical weather models. I applaud NOAA's progress, and look forward to further action on this front.

This Committee will remain vigilant in its oversight responsibilities to ensure that Americans have the best possible weather forecasts to save lives and property.

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