

**The Honorable Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI)
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight**

OPENING STATEMENT

"Weathering the Congressional Storm"

July 19, 2007

In December, 2006, Mr. Bill Proenza was announced as the Director of the Tropical Prediction Center (TPC). In July 2007, after his superiors, employees, and an independent assessment team questioned his management of the TPC, the Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) placed Mr. Proenza on temporary leave pending the final recommendation of the assessment team. The independent assessment team unequivocally found that the TPC could not operate effectively under Mr. Proenza's leadership.

The United States is in the middle of hurricane season. After Hurricane Katrina, everyone is aware how dangerous this season can be. The Tropical Prediction Center (TPC) compiles data about ocean temperature, wind speed and direction, barometric pressure, and other factors, and uses this data to forecast hurricanes. When a storm is within three days of potential landfall, the TPC issues official forecasts and warnings every six hours. As a storm gets closer to land, the forecasts are updated even more frequently. Lives depend on the work at the TPC.

Last month, in the midst of an investigation of NASA's inspector general, I warned that we risked creating a culture of overzealous oversight. I reiterate that point today: There is a fine line between good oversight and harmful interference. Playing politics with hurricane forecasters endangers the lives of the people the TPC works to protect.

Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher, the Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, replaced Mr. Proenza because he was an ineffective director. In the spring of this year, Mr. Proenza made several exaggerated and inaccurate public statements complaining about a lack of resources and funding at the TPC, the potential failure of one of the TPC's satellites, and NOAA's use of funds for the 200th Anniversary celebration of the coastal survey. In an independent assessment of the TPC performed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), reviewers observed that Mr. Proenza made statements about the limited lifetime of the QuikSCAT satellite and the resulting impact on forecasts "without context or caveat." The reviewers further reported that many staff believed that Mr. Proenza intentionally misrepresented their views and repeated certain false claims even after he was corrected.

On June 18, Mary Glackin, the Acting Director of the National Weather Service, received phone calls from 11 employees of the TPC, including 7 out of the 9 hurricane forecasters, raising concerns about Mr. Proenza's leadership. The employees complained that Mr. Proenza interfered with their ability to do their jobs. On June 19, Ms. Glackin communicated her fears to Admiral Lautenbacher. Admiral Lautenbacher then sent the Independent Assessment Team from NIST to report on the situation.

Meanwhile, staff discontent was increasing. Three senior forecasters called for Mr. Proenza's removal and nearly half of the 46 staff members at the TPC signed a petition demanding his removal because, according to Center staff, the "effective functioning" of the Center was at stake with Mr. Proenza as its director. On July 6, the NIST assessment team requested that Mr. Proenza be placed on

leave because he was jeopardizing the Center's ability to do its job. Three days later, Mr. Lautenbacher informed Mr. Proenza that he was being placed on leave.

Upon completion of its report, the independent team's recommendation was unequivocal:

The current TPC director should be reassigned and not be allowed to return to his position at the center. This should be done due to his failure to demonstrate leadership within the TPC . . .

Such substantial questions were raised about Mr. Proenza, that a failure to replace him would have been irresponsible. During this Subcommittee's investigation of NASA's inspector general, the majority continuously objected to leaving an inspector general in place who did not have the confidence of his staff. In the present situation, employees have made similar complaints and the raised the same concerns about Mr. Proenza's leadership. I have no doubt that, if Mr. Proenza were still serving as the director of the TPC, this Subcommittee would be waiving the employee petition in front of Admiral Lautenbacher demanding that he take action. Mr. Proenza's name would have been added to the growing list of personnel decisions demanded of the Administration by Congress.

Instead, the majority is questioning the veracity of the employees' complaints. In a July 12 letter to Admiral Lautenbacher, five Democratic Congressman wrote that "it is alleged that staff was pressured to sign on to what became a well-publicized letter of complaint" against Mr. Proenza. I have no idea who made this allegation. According to the *Orlando Sentinel*, staffers at the TPC "angrily objected to suggestions that some were 'pressured' into signing the letter."

The Center's administrative officer said, "No one was pressured to sign that letter, but they aren't calling the people who signed it to find it. Why not? I smell politics at work here."

Conspicuously, none of the employers who worked under Mr. Proenza at the TPC are here to testify today. Instead, the majority invited two emergency management officials who worked with Mr. Proenza when he served in his former position as the Southern Region Director for the National Weather Service. No one has raised any issues with Mr. Proenza's effectiveness in that role. The complaints have all been about his ability to lead the TPC. It appears that the Majority has held today's hearing and questioned the independence of the Center's staff without even talking to the staff that made those complaints.

Dr. James Turner is here to testify about the findings of the independent assessment team, but he is here because he was invited by the Minority. The Majority was prepared to hold a hearing "investigating" the replacement of Dr. Proenza without inviting the independent assessors who reported on management of the TPC or the TPC employees whose recommendations and complaints lead to Dr. Proenza's replacements. No wonder the Center's Administrative Officer smelled politics.

None of us are strangers to politics, but to disregard our country's readiness to obtain a political advantage extends beyond recklessness. I am disappointed that I have to state what should be obvious, that unwarranted interference with the operation of a small hurricane center at its most critical time can only cause more harm than good. The Tropical Prediction Center should be allowed to focus on the hurricane season instead of being forced to weather this Congressional storm.