

OPENING STATEMENT

The Honorable Ralph M. Hall (R-TX), Chairman
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Drought Forecasting, Monitoring, and Decision-Making: A Review of the National Integrated Drought Information System

July 25th, 2012

Good morning, and welcome to today's hearing on "Drought Forecasting, Monitoring, and Decision-Making: A Review of the National Integrated Drought Information System."

This hearing is particularly timely given the current drought conditions that are impacting much of the country, including my home state of Texas.

According to the latest U.S. Drought Monitor, over 70 percent of the United States is currently classified as abnormally dry or worse; further over half of the continental U.S. is experiencing moderate to extreme drought, and a third of the country is characterized as being in severe to extreme drought.

These widespread drought conditions are negatively affecting corn and soybean crops; as of July 17, the Department of Agriculture reported that 88 percent of the Nation's corn and 87 percent of the Nation's soybeans were in drought-stricken areas. In response to the pervasiveness of such dry conditions, Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, designated 1,055 counties across the country as disaster areas.

Droughts, unfortunately, have long been and continue to be recurring events. Using NOAA's own data over the past 110 plus years, we see that drought has frequently occurred in the U.S.—the worst being the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s and the drought of the 1950s.

There are some, of course, who would attribute this year's drought to climate change; however, the Congressional Research Service tell us that "[d]rought has afflicted portions of North America for thousands of years" and "[h]istory suggests that severe and extended droughts are inevitable and part of natural climate cycles."

In any event, debating the causes of drought is not in front of us today. The real question is: What can be done to provide better and timelier information to help enable Federal, State and local governments, and individual citizens better deal with droughts' impacts, and how to afford better forecasting and quicker reactions by governmental entities?

The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) program, established by the National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006, is one such effort undertaken to answer this question. Housed in the Climate Program Office within the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research at NOAA, its goal is to "improve the nation's capacity to proactively manage drought-related risks, by providing those affected with the best available information and tools to assess the potential impacts of drought, and to better prepare for and mitigate the effects of drought."

The NIDIS program developed and currently operates the U.S. Drought Portal, a website that features a range of services related to drought, including historical data on past droughts, current data from climate observations, early warnings about emerging and potential droughts, decision support services for managing droughts, and a forum for stakeholders to discuss drought-related issues.

NIDIS's authorization expires at the end of this year; therefore we will receive testimony from witnesses representing Federal, State and local governments as well as stakeholders on the program, and on the discussion draft, "The National Integrated Drought Information System Reauthorization Act of 2012."

I welcome our witnesses and look forward to their testimony, and now recognize Ranking Member Johnson for her opening statement.