OPENING STATEMENT
The Honorable Andy Harris (R-MD), Chairman
Subcommittee on Energy and Environment
To Observe and Protect: How NOAA Procures Data for Weather Forecasting

March 28, 2012

I want to welcome everyone to this afternoon's hearing to gain a better understanding of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's approach to procuring data for weather forecasting.

Three weeks ago while testifying before this Subcommittee, NOAA Administrator Lubchenco spoke of the "tough choices" required in developing the Administration's fiscal year 2013 budget request, which, by the way, included an increase in funding of 3.1 percent. Each year, the budget request for satellite programs grows as a percentage of NOAA's total budget request. NOAA's "tough choices" have resulted in placing nearly all of its eggs in a single basket: satellite systems fraught with a long history of major problems. These decisions are causing trade-offs with other valuable networks. Today's hearing is designed to take a closer look at the NOAA process for making those tough choices when it comes to costly observing systems, including how requirements are determined, how data needs are met and how NOAA research is facilitating better analysis and technologies.

We all recognize three things about NOAA and weather forecasting in the future: First, recent severe storms have reaffirmed that we need to focus limited NOAA resources on preventing the loss of lives and property. Second, NOAA satellite programs have been plagued by schedule delays, chronic mismanagement and significant cost overruns. Third, as admitted by NOAA and confirmed by Government Accountability Office experts, there will be a gap in polar-orbiting satellite data in the not-too-distant future, and Dr. Lubchenco told this Committee earlier this month that there aren't any "viable alternative options." We hope to explore this statement in further detail today.

The FY13 budget request provides a perfect illustration of the need to take a closer look at NOAA's process. Satellite programs represent almost 40 percent of the total $5.1 billion budget request, with the result being that programs in other line offices suffer. The decision to invest so heavily in the currently planned space-based remote sensing systems comes at the expense of observing systems that would come at a small fraction of the price. For example, NOAA has made decisions to eliminate or reduce investments in the national Profiler Network, the national Mesonet Network, and the tsunami buoy network. These decisions will affect lives and property and have not seemed to have been based on independent analysis.

Knowing the challenges NOAA and the Weather Service face, it is all the more important that we conduct impartial technical assessments to guarantee that the money we spend on a combination of observing systems gets us the greatest forecasting bang for our buck, and that our data procurement is based on costs and benefits, rather than subjective thinking. Rather than relying on the whims of an individual Administration or the opinions of subject matter experts divorced from fiscal realities or program managers wedded to certain systems, NOAA needs to

undertake comprehensive, objective, and quantitative evaluations of observing systems that incorporates cost.

There are options available to conduct more thorough analysis of these systems. For example, in a recent article, Administrator Lubchenco referred to the use of Observing System Simulation Experiments (OSSEs) as a "powerful tool" for evaluation different combinations of observing systems to meet forecasting needs. Unfortunately, NOAA has not used this powerful tool to guide decision-making related to current weather data challenges.

The status quo cannot continue. We no longer have the budgetary luxury to repeat past mistakes in our approach to procuring data for weather forecasting. NOAA needs to think beyond its current framework on the most cost-effective and efficient way to get data for weather forecasting. Technological advancements in the last two decades make it possible for more information to come from the private sector while still maintaining the level of quality assurance necessary for weather forecasting. Improvements in computer processing and data assimilation allow for different combinations of data to create advanced forecasts. Such progress requires NOAA employ objective analysis to determine the best course forward.

I want to thank the witnesses for appearing before the Subcommittee and I look forward to a constructive discussion.