

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6301

May 8, 2015

(202) 225-6371
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The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We are writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) undertake a review of the present and future staffing levels in operational units at the National Weather Service (NWS). Such a review will support ongoing efforts to evolve the NWS and the agency's focus of providing increased levels of impact-based decision support services and improving the consistency of NWS products and services, while also accelerating the speed with which NWS forecasters can take advantage of new technologies and innovations.

According to a 2011 study by the National Academy of Sciences, "the quality of the NWS's warning capability corresponds with its capacity to muster an ample, fully trained local staff at its Weather Forecast Offices as severe weather unfolds." Although the NWS was fully funded in FY 2014, the number of vacant operational positions at Weather Forecast Offices and national forecasting centers continues to grow. According to reports that the NWS has provided to the National Weather Service Employees Organization, between September 2010 and February 2015 the number of non-supervisory, non-managerial employees at the NWS fell from 3877 to 3469. This is a 10% reduction in a workforce that is predominately classified as "emergency-essential."

There may now be as many as 200 vacant meteorologist positions at the Weather Forecast Offices, national forecasting centers (such as the National Hurricane Center in Miami and the Severe Storms Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma), and the Center Weather Service Units that the NWS operates at the 21 FAA Air Route Traffic Control Centers. All of these positions are classified as "emergency-essential."

It is troubling that this staff drawdown appears to be done randomly as positions become vacant, which is leaving staffing imbalances in Forecast Offices and River Forecast Centers across the country.

We also have concerns about the NWS intern program. Among the staff allocations at each Weather Forecast Office are 3 or 4 "meteorologist interns," who are young

meteorologist graduates that undergo three or four years of on-the-job training required to qualify as journeyman forecasters. It appears that as many as 85 of the approximately 400 meteorologist intern positions are currently vacant. As of this week there are no active vacancy announcements for these slots. This 20% vacancy rate threatens the ability of the NWS to replace retiring forecasters in sufficient numbers. As the National Academy of Public Administration wrote in 2013, “[i]n the last three years, the NWS has realized personnel losses at a greater rate than it has been hiring. If this trend continues, the NWS is in danger of losing a significant segment of the workforce and will not be able to renew itself at a sustainable rate. . .”

According to the agency, the NWS processed more than 500 recruitment actions in FY 2014, but nearly 80% of these recruitments were internal promotions. In short, more operational NWS employees retire each year than are being hired.

It is unclear why the NWS is reducing its operational staffing in this manner. The agency has attributed its staffing shortfalls at various times to either underfunding, the inability of NOAA’s Office of Workforce Management to process, advertise, and fill vacant positions in a timely and competent manner, or both. The former reason may not provide a satisfactory explanation for the increasing vacancy rate, as Congress has approved the agency’s budget request in full each year. Additionally, the NWS ended FY 2014 with approximately \$125 million in unspent carry-over funding. The salaries of virtually all NWS employees are funded out of two PPAs or line items: “Local Warnings and Forecasts” and “Central Forecast Guidance.” The NWS ended FY 2014 with \$35,379,173 in carry-over funds in these two accounts.

Therefore, we request that the GAO conduct a review to answer the following questions:

Does the NWS today have sufficient operational staffing at its operational forecasting units to ensure the timely and accurate provision of forecasts, warnings, and decision support services? In your review, please consider and address factors such as productivity, human factors, workload, and the increasing demand by local communities and emergency managers for NWS decision support services.

Do the staffing imbalances at the various forecast offices jeopardize services?

Are higher-graded employees being assigned to perform lower-graded work (such as managers routinely working forecasting shifts or forecasters conducting upper air observations, which is the work of hydrometeorological technicians) because of vacancies in lower-graded positions?

Are the scheduling practices that have been put into place in operational units to ensure shift coverage jeopardizing employee health, safety, productivity or taking earned leave?

Is the NWS recruiting an adequate number of meteorologist interns to ensure that

the NWS has a sufficient number of qualified journey and lead forecaster in the future?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this request. We look forward to your response. Please contact Marcy Gallo of the Committee staff at (202) 225-1445 if you have any questions about this request.

Sincerely,



Daniel Lipinski
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Research
and Technology



Suzanne Bonamici
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on
Environment



Don Beyer
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on
Oversight