

Restoring U.S. Leadership in Weather Forecasting

Witnesses:

Mr. Barry Myers

Chief Executive Officer, Accuweather

Mr. Jon Kirchner

President, GeoOptics

Committee Members Present:

Chris Stewart (R-UT), Chair

Susanne Bonamici (D-OR), Ranking Member

Randy Weber (R-TX)

Paul Broun (R-GA)

Dana Rohrbacher (R-CA)

On May 23, 2013 the Subcommittee on Energy of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee held a hearing on Restoring U.S. Leadership in Weather Forecasting. With witness testimony from Mr. Barry Myers, Chief Executive Officer of AccuWeather, a private weather forecasting company, and Mr. Jon Kirchner, President of GeoOptics, a private environmental data company, the hearing focused on how to improve budgeting and cooperation between federal weather organizations and the private weather industry.

In his opening remarks, Chairman Chris Stewart (R-UT) spoke on the importance of real time forecasting highlighted by the recent disaster in Moore, OK where an EF5 tornado killed 24 people. Mr. Myers and Mr. Kirchner then discussed how important cooperation between government and private sector weather industry is if the goal of re-establishing world leadership in weather forecasting is to be met. Mr. Myers went on to stress the importance of free information in maintaining and growing this cooperative relationship, summarizing it by saying, "For example, decades ago, the Federal Government made both weather data and the Global Positioning System (GPS) freely available to anyone. Since then, American entrepreneurs and innovators have used these resources to create navigation systems, weather newscasts and warning systems, location based applications, precision farming tools, and much more."

Mr. Kirchner highlighted the fiscally beneficial aspects of increasing this cooperation between the private and public sectors, citing figures indicating that average cost-to-in-orbit delivery for a single sensor in the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS) has risen from \$80 million in 2005 to \$500 million currently, and that allocating even the original \$80 million to private sector industry could achieve far more. He went on to add that with this \$80 million "a private sector company can deploy a constellation of a dozen small satellites, each carrying a state-of-the-art sensor," and that these satellites could measure critical weather parameters "with accuracies and resolutions far surpassing those of any instrument that will fly on the JPSS."

Questions from members of Congress focused both on the overall impact of weather forecasting and the relationship between weather forecasting and climate change. Representative Randy Weber (R-TX) and Chairman Stewart both inquired as to what the goals of storms forecasting were and what was the degree of predictability of a storm? Mr. Myers responded by saying that the goal of storm forecasting was to "provide time for getting away from tornadoes" and that some storms were more predictable than others, but that predictability is always getting better. Mr. Kirchner followed up this point by saying that we can now predict storms "precious hours" earlier than before and that we can now see storms that were invisible in the past.

Representative Paul Broun (R-GA) asked about the disparity in the funds allocated to weather forecasting versus climate change, to which Mr. Myers agreed that a reallocation is needed. Ranking Member Representative Susanne Bonamici (D-OR) brought up somewhat of a flipside to this point, asking what becomes of other programs if weather forecasting becomes the top priority at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Along these same lines, Representative Dana Rohrbacher (R-CA) questioned if climate change is having any impact on the weather or if we are just more aware of the weather, to which Mr. Myers indicated that both appear to be true, but provided no definitive answer.

Ultimately, because representatives from NOAA were not present, the subcommittee called for another hearing at a later date with further witness testimony.