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On December 16, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on the status of the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS), which will replace the current polar orbiting satellite, Suomi-National Polar-orbiting Partnership (S-NPP). These satellites provide vital data on weather, climate, oceans, and the environment that are used by scientists and the U.S. military.

In an earlier report in 2013, GAO had added the JPSS Program to its High Risk List due to the likelihood of a gap in satellite coverage between when the S-NPP goes offline and the JPSS begins transmitting data. The JPSS has been delayed due to technical difficulties and growth of costs for key components.

Previous assessments of the gap placed it between 14 to 18 months, starting in 2016. A gap in coverage could entail less accurate and timely forecasts, resulting in a lack of warnings for extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the agency responsible for S-NPP and JPSS, revised its gap estimate to 3 months based on the current performance of the S-NPP, but the GAO report concludes that NOAA did not consider possible early failure of the satellite due to space debris. The GAO report suggests a potential gap of 11 months to over 5 years and urges NOAA to address shortcomings in its contingency plan and to further prioritize mitigation strategies.

Sources: E&E News, Government Office of Accountability, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

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