Policy Update: House Committee Debates NOAA’s Plans to Create Climate Service

Lewis-Burke Associates LLC – June 23, 2011

On June 22, the House Science, Space and Technology Committee held a hearing to discuss the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) proposal to reorganize the agency to facilitate the creation of a Climate Service line office. The hearing included two witnesses: Dr. Jane Lubchenco, NOAA Administrator, and Mr. Robert Winokur, Deputy Oceanographer for the Navy. The creation of a NOAA Climate Service was formally proposed in February 2010; however, given concerns and some objections expressed by Members of Congress, primarily Republican members of the Science Committee, NOAA has had to slow its efforts and await consent from Congress, which is becoming increasingly difficult to attain. The President’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 budget request for NOAA includes a formal proposal that would consolidate existing NOAA climate research and service activities into a single line office.

Highlights from the hearing include:

- There was no debate on the validity of climate science during the hearing, which was a departure from recent Science Committee hearings that used the “Climategate” scandal to call into question climate science and the work of the world’s leading climate researchers. Instead, the hearing focused on NOAA’s motivations for creating a Climate Service.
- Committee Republicans called NOAA’s proposal “politically charged” and accused Dr. Lubchenco of breaking the law by moving forward with Climate Service implementation without Congressional consent; Dr. Lubchenco vehemently denied that NOAA operated outside of its existing authorities.
- Democrats lauded the NOAA proposals and used the hearing to highlight the economic and severe weather impacts of not approving the Climate Service reorganization.
- The outlook for approval of the Climate Service in the FY 2012 appropriations bills is bleak, with Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA), Chairman of the House Commerce, Justice, Science (CJS) Appropriations Subcommittee, largely deferring the decision to Science Committee Chairman Ralph Hall (R-TX).

Unlike other recent Science Committee hearings, there was no discussion on the validity of climate science or whether climate change is occurring due to anthropogenic forces. Debate centered solely on NOAA’s motivations for creating a climate service, with many Republican members calling the proposal “political propaganda” and Democrats hailing the proposal for increasing efficiencies at the agency.

Chairman Hall used his opening remarks to express concern that NOAA has not consulted with the Committee as much as he would have liked in the development of the Climate Service, stating that the hearing was the Committee’s first opportunity to examine the proposal, particularly the proposed transition of funds from current line offices to the Climate Service. He conveyed two main concerns about NOAA’s proposal; first being the process by which NOAA proposed the Climate Service. As you may recall, NOAA released its plans to develop the new line office in February 2010, which the agency described as a reorganization that would not require new funding. Many Members of
Congress objected to NOAA proceeding with a reorganization without attaining approval from the Committees that have oversight responsibility. Second, the Chairman expressed concern with the movement of existing NOAA research programs, laboratories and offices away from the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (OAR) to the Climate Service. He fears a reorganization, and perceived prioritization of climate research and services, would harm other NOAA programs, such as drought prediction.

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) countered the Chairman’s concerns, stating that the Committee has had more opportunities than any other committee in Congress to discuss climate change science and policy, including the NOAA proposal, but that Congress continues to “take steps back” by turning to “fear, doubt and ignorance” when it comes to consideration of anything related to climate change. She called on Committee members to get moving on the issue and to move beyond denying climate change and start focusing on adaptation and the economic impacts of climate change.

In her prepared statement, Dr. Lubchenco outlined NOAA’s Climate Service proposal, calling the reorganization necessary in order to strengthen science across the agency, meet the growing demand for climate information, and to more readily transition climate science into products and services. Dr. Lubchenco assured the Committee that NOAA has not established the Climate Service and is awaiting official approval from Congress. This statement stems from the original February 2010 announcement and criticisms expressed by Committee members about NOAA proceeding with the reorganization without consent. Specifically, Committee Republicans were troubled by remarks made this past December by Tom Karl, NOAA’s Climate Service Transition Director, stating that, “We’ve [NOAA’s] moved in… we’re waiting for the marriage certificate, but we’re acting like we have a Climate Service.” These concerns ultimately led to the inclusion of language in the final FY 2011 appropriations agreement prohibiting the use of NOAA funds for the implementation of the Climate Service, further making the point that Congress wishes to be consulted in the process. In her testimony, Dr. Lubchenco acknowledged that the way NOAA chose to roll out the proposal over a year ago did not get the agency off on the right foot with the Committee and expressed regret for how the process began.

Dr. Lubchenco also used her testimony to give examples of the usefulness of NOAA climate and weather data and the increased demands by stakeholders. She noted the ongoing development of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Western Governors Association (WGA) that will assist with the dissemination of climate information, especially relating to drought forecasts and services. She also explained that new climate industries would likely crop up if a Climate Service is created, similar to the $1 billion weather industry that was created around the National Weather Service. She ended her prepared remarks by reminding the Committee that the concept of a Climate Service within NOAA is not new and not an issue unique to the Democratic agenda. The idea has been around since the 1970s but really took hold during the George W. Bush Administration when then-NOAA Administrator Conrad Lautenbacher set the wheels in motion by stating NOAA’s intent to create the Service. She also reassured the Committee of NOAA’s intent to strength NOAA research, particularly OAR, through this reorganization and that other non-climate science activities would not be impacted.

Mr. Winokur testified at the request of the Democratic minority about the needs of the Navy for climatological information. While he noted that the Navy cannot take a position on what structure
NOAA should implement for its Climate Service, the Navy would like to see a more coordinated climate enterprise at NOAA, which would include a single portal to obtain information. He stated that the Navy has been using “actionable climatological information” for over 150 years and has been relying on NOAA data since the agency was created over 40 years ago. The information helps the Navy with activities such as planning exercises, ammunition transfers, and search and rescue. Further, the National Maritime Strategy and the Quadrennial Defense Review both highlight climate change “as a significant factor to be considered when anticipating naval requirements of the 21st century.” From the perspective of the Navy as a customer of the Climate Service, Mr. Winokur stated that a restructuring of NOAA’s climate assets would be beneficial as current information is disparate and hard to find.

Questions from Committee members illustrated the ongoing divide between Republicans and Democrats. For example, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) called into question whether NOAA violated the language that was included in the FY 2011 appropriations bill by hiring six new regional climate services directors and adding the title of “Climate Service Transition Director” to Dr. Karl’s title. Dr. Lubchenco responded that those positions were created months before Congress finalized its FY 2011 bills, adding that NOAA already has authority under existing laws to make such appointments and that they are consistent with NOAA’s ongoing climate activities, separate from the Climate Service reorganization. Rep. Paul Broun (R-GA) took the argument further, accusing Dr. Lubchenco of “breaking the law” by still working to establish the Climate Service despite the FY 2011 language. He also called the Climate Service a “propaganda office” with a goal of policy advocacy, suggesting that NOAA already has the capabilities to do climate research through NWS, specifically the Climate Prediction Center (CPC). Dr. Lubchenco responded that CPC cannot handle all of NOAA’s climate responsibilities and that the Climate Service reorganization is simply meant to increase efficiencies within the agency. She added that it has nothing to do with cap and trade and is by no means regulatory.

In general, the Democratic members of the Committee took a different approach when questioning Dr. Lubchenco by focusing on the value of climate information and the positive impacts this data has on the country. In addition, Rep. David Wu (D-OR) sought to make sure that Committee members understood what “climate services” actually means by asking Dr. Lubchenco to explain to the Committee the differences between weather and climate. Dr. Lubchenco explained that weather happens over a period of hours to days and climate is generally any period of time over two weeks.

Chairman Hall noted that this hearing was just the first on the topic, signaling that additional hearings may be scheduled as Congress weighs whether to approve the reorganization in the FY 2012 appropriations bills. However, given the unyielding divide on this issue and the inclusion of language so far in some of the FY 2012 appropriations bills, such as the Agriculture and Homeland Security bills, prohibiting funds from being used for climate change activities, the outlook is not promising for approval of the Climate Service this year. Additionally, CJS Chairman Wolf is largely deferring to Chairman Hall on how to proceed on the Climate Service in FY 2012, which does not bode well for the proposal in the near term.

For additional information, please see the witness testimony and archived webcast on House Science, Space and Technology Committee website: http://science.house.gov/hearing/full-committee-hearing-noaas-climate-service-proposal.