Policy Update: Senate Committee Discusses Value of NOAA’s Weather and Climate Endeavors

Lewis-Burke Associates LLC – November 21, 2011

On November 16, the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard held a hearing entitled, “Weathering Change: Need for Continued Innovation in Forecasting and Prediction.” Chairman Mark Begich (D-AK) stated that the purpose of the hearing was to provide oversight of the weather and climate functions of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). In particular, the Subcommittee addressed NOAA’s proposal to create a climate service as well the status of NOAA’s weather satellite programs. With respect to the latter, Chairman Begich noted his support for NOAA’s Joint Polar-orbiting Satellite System (JPSS) and expressed his satisfaction with the conference funding level for JPSS in fiscal year (FY) 2012.

Senator Olympia Snowe, Subcommittee Ranking Member, said continuity is needed in weather and climate information, but that JPSS represents a huge chunk of NOAA’s total budget. She still has concerns about the program, including the certain data gap in 2016 due to past insufficient funding that has stunted the program’s progress. She added that the private sector is looking at ways to provide this data more cheaply, but she did not elaborate.

The first panel of witnesses included representatives from the federal government. Mary Glackin, Deputy Under Secretary for Operations at NOAA, discussed the costs of natural disasters on the U.S. economy, noting that there were at least 10 disasters this year that cost $1 billion or more. She highlighted two ways NOAA works to ensure the U.S. is prepared for extreme weather events. The first is through the deployment of Dual Polarization radar technology, which is the latest weather radar upgrade and will provide “both horizontal and now vertical components to what NEXRAD Doppler radar is seeing.” This technology will lead to better prediction of total precipitation, impacting those who deal with water management, flooding, and severe thunderstorms.

The second program highlighted by Glackin was JPSS. She noted that NOAA is anticipating and preparing for a data gap in 2016. When Chairman Begich asked about NOAA’s specific preparations, Glackin replied the agency is strengthening international partnerships to possibly help fill in U.S. data needs. Furthermore, NOAA will use available data it currently has from in situ and other satellite systems.

In addition, Glackin noted it is not enough to provide longer lead times for extreme events; people must hear warnings and take appropriate action if the U.S. is to become a true “weather-ready nation.” NOAA will work with other federal agencies, the private sector, academic institutions, state and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations to work toward this goal.

The next witness, Todd J. Zinser, Inspector General of the Department of Commerce (DOC), summarized the Inspector General’s September 30 oversight report, “Audit of the Joint Polar Satellite System: Challenges Must be Met to Minimize Gaps in Polar Environmental Satellite Data,” (http://www.oig.doc.gov/Pages/Audit-of-the-Joint-Polar-Satellite-System.aspx) which made three main observations about the program. First, JPSS is critically important for the nation, but even with its new configuration (the program was reorganized and renamed in the President’s FY 2011 budget request), it
still must overcome years of setbacks by its predecessor, NPOESS. Second, many challenges remain for JPSS, which are now met with fiscal constraints. DOC is concerned with both preventing the near-term data gap between the end of NOAA-19 (the current polar-orbiting system) and NPP, which launched in October 2011 but will take a few years to come on board, as well as mitigating a longer term coverage gap between the end of NPP and the operational date for JPSS-1. NPP, which was originally designed as a test project, has become the JPSS contingency. The data gap could be as long as 21 months with the actual launch date for JPSS depending heavily on full funding of the program in the next several fiscal years. Finally, the Inspector General’s third observation was that NOAA senior management must ensure there is no more slippage in JPSS’s schedule.

The report made two main recommendations. First, NOAA should finalize a program baseline and keep DOC and Congress updated on the status of that baseline. Second, NOAA should coordinate better across the agency in order to get the needed data to deal with data gap. According to the report, NOAA is not currently doing an adequate job of bringing NOAA line offices together to troubleshoot data issues; for example, the National Weather Service (NWS) and the National Environmental Data and Information Service (NESDIS) are not coordinating activities.

The third witness, David C. Trimble, Director of the Natural Resources and Environment Branch at the Government Accountability Office (GAO), discussed NOAA’s climate change activities and its proposal to create a new climate service. He pointed out that climate adaptation will continue to receive increasing attention as state and local authorities grapple with the impacts of climate change. While local officials desire usable climate information, federal agency officials do not have a shared understanding of climate adaptation priorities, thereby preventing any major federal climate adaptation action. It is important to note that the FY 2012 conference agreement did not endorse NOAA’s creation of a climate service. As such, the fate of NOAA climate service information remains unknown.

The second panel included users of NOAA data, including Tom Iseman, Program Director for Water Policy and Implementation, Climate Adaptation, Western Governors’ Association; Peter Neilley, Vice President, Global Forecasting Services, The Weather Channel Companies; and Robert Marshall, President and CEO of Earth Networks. Their testimonies included specific ways their respective organizations benefit from NOAA weather and climate information.

For additional information, please see the witness testimony and archived webcast on Senate Commerce Committee website: http://commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=Hearings&ContentRecord_id=21b6cc05-b6ca-4e86-9b25-36f92c08af5b.