



THE WEATHER
COALITION

6 June 2006

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The Honorable Sherwood Boehlert
Chairman
Committee on Science
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

FACSIMILE SENT: 202-226-0113

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Act, HR 5450, on behalf of the Weather Coalition. The Weather Coalition comprises a diverse group of representatives (list attached) from industry, academia, science and education consortia and a national laboratory. We are committed to working together to improve the capabilities of the country's weather prediction and warning capabilities and therefore take an active interest in NOAA's research and research-to-operations activities.

We strongly support this effort to provide an Organic Act for NOAA. When enacted, an Organic Act will formalize and legitimize the many activities that the agency does to execute its critical mission on behalf of the nation. We would like to comment on the following content of the Act:

Administration Leadership

The academic community is an essential collaborator in NOAA education, research, applications, and outreach efforts. The private sector is especially critical in research applications work and the provision of weather-and climate-related information to consumers at all levels. We believe that NOAA should do more to effectively utilize university and private sector partnerships in the accomplishment of the overall NOAA mission. *Thus, we commend the authority given the Administrator to enter into cooperative agreements with commercial organizations and educational institutions but believe that mechanisms to sustain, leverage, and enhance the advantageous relationships between NOAA and these sectors should be stated more explicitly throughout the Act. We ask that Congress encourage NOAA to develop these mechanisms to strengthen collaborations between NOAA and the private and academic sectors, especially in regard to weather research and operations. Further, we suggest that the NOAA mission should more strongly reflect that of its parent organization, so that the Agency works to "create the conditions for economic growth and opportunity by promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and stewardship," especially in those areas of research and commerce that are closely linked to the Agency's activities. Explicit instructions to NOAA in this regard would help address many of the concerns private sector meteorologists have concerning NOAA operations.*

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Science, Technology, Education and Outreach

We support the bill's establishment of a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Science, Technology, Education and Outreach and applaud the authority given this person to coordinate research and development budgets as well as the agency's educational programs. Such a position would provide the leadership necessary to establish clear NOAA-wide research priorities, organize, and coordinate research endeavors, and give NOAA science and technology a more unified voice in the budget process. Unfortunately, funding for NOAA-sponsored research continues to decrease annually. We must reverse this trend if NOAA is to serve the nation at its most efficient and effective capacity.

We strongly support the Deputy Assistant Secretary being charged with developing "guidelines for peer review of science and technology research sponsored by the Administration." A well-run peer review program is essential to maintaining the quality and credibility of NOAA science.

We are also pleased to see that one of the functions of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Science, Technology, Education and Outreach will be to serve as a liaison to the nongovernmental science and technology community. Establishing a central point of contact in NOAA for the external community will streamline NOAA's interaction with the weather and climate enterprise and should facilitate involvement from nongovernmental experts – involvement that is critical to producing the best research and technological applications possible. Many of the most innovative advances in research and technology come from outside the public sector, and we believe that our nation's weather enterprise will be strongest when these results are integrated into NOAA's research and technology development process.

National Weather Service (NWS)

We believe that the National Weather Service's weather, water, climate, and space weather forecasts and warnings are critical to the efficiency, productivity, and national security of our nation as well as the safety of our citizens. *The NWS mission, goals, and functions as outlined in the bill are appropriate to federal government responsibilities.* However, we believe that there are ways in which involvement from the private and academic sectors can enhance the performance of and the critical services delivered by the NWS and other NOAA elements such as NESDIS. We are therefore pleased to see that the language concerning Public-Private Partnerships is included. *We believe this should include all of NOAA and that the external community should be involved in offering input and comment on the report that is to be developed by the Secretary. In addition, the Weather Coalition suggests the Committee consider legislation authorizing the establishment of a federally chartered advisory committee.*

Such a committee was recommended in the National Academy of Sciences' report entitled, *Fair Weather: Effective Partnerships in Weather and Climate Services (2003)*.

The *Fair Weather* report concluded that the rapid changes in science and technology underlying weather and climate forecasting are likely to continue. "Therefore, the committee's primary conclusion is that it is counterproductive and diversionary to establish detailed and rigid boundaries for each sector outlining who can do what and with which tools. Instead, efforts should focus on improving the processes by which the public and private providers of weather services interact."

The various scientific venues (such as the new Commission on the Weather and Climate Enterprise established by the American Meteorological Society), NWS-sponsored user meetings, and the occasional forum on the public-private partnership are valuable and should be continued as part of the process for improving communication among the sectors. However a federally chartered advisory committee would operate within the NOAA policy-making process in regard to weather and climate operations and services, complementing the research focus of the existing NOAA Science Advisory Board. This would allow for meaningful public-private coordination and cooperation with respect to the weather enterprise. The committee could help to coordinate federal and nongovernmental efforts in weather data gathering and dissemination with optimal efficiency. In turn, this would serve to reduce the current tensions between the external community and the agency. The end result will be a stronger and more effective weather enterprise.

Research and Education

The Weather Coalition strongly supports the provisions specifically requiring NOAA research programs to support "extramural peer-reviewed competitive grant programs to assist the Administration in performing the functions described in this subsection." As stated above, funding for NOAA sponsored research continues to decrease annually. This can only weaken NOAA research and, in turn, NOAA technology development and operations. Coalition members believe that increased collaboration, partnering, and fair and open competition among researchers – both those in federal agencies and those outside federal service – will greatly improve the quality and utility of NOAA research activities. *We support the language included in this section, and urge the Committee to do everything possible to work with the Appropriations Committee to ensure that an extramural peer-reviewed competitive grant program continues to exist at NOAA and is enhanced to become far more significant than it is at present.*

Science Advisory Board (SAB)

We applaud the inclusion of the Science Advisory Board section in the bill. This board provides necessary input directly to the NOAA Administrator to ensure that NOAA science programs are of the highest quality. *In order that the SAB has the utmost credibility and authority, we believe that appointments should be made at the highest level possible and that this should be stated in this section.*

Reports

We support the bill's requirement that the Administrator's report on NOAA's environmental data and information systems be reviewed by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and that the Strategic Plan for Scientific Research also be reviewed by the NAS. The expertise that NAS reviewers will bring to these important documents will be of great benefit. Of equal importance is the bill's inclusion of input on the Strategic Plan for Scientific Research from external stakeholders at all levels. As stated above, external expertise will enable NOAA to serve the nation at maximum capacity.

Transition

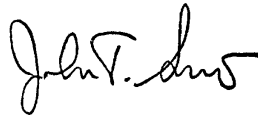
We appreciate and support the stated involvement of the external community in reorganization plan consultation.

In closing, we would like to thank you on behalf of the Weather Coalition members for your efforts to create an Organic Act for NOAA. Such a bill is long overdue. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to move this bill through the legislative process.

Sincerely,



Raymond J. Ban
Executive Vice President
The Weather Channel



John T. Snow
Director, Oklahoma Weather Center
and Dean, College of Geosciences at
The University of Oklahoma

Co-Chairs of the Weather Coalition

cc: Honorable Bart Gordon, Ranking Minority Member

Enclosure