



Opening Statement of Chairman Frank Lucas

Full Committee Hearing
Establishing an Independent NOAA

April 18, 2023

Good morning. Today's hearing focuses on a topic of great importance to this committee: the future of NOAA, its mission, and its place within the executive branch.

NOAA is one of the most important agencies within our committee's jurisdiction. Its role in forecasting weather, which protects lives and property, cannot be understated. And its cutting-edge research helps us better understand our planet and our climate, allowing us to make sustainable use of our country's tremendous natural resources.

However, despite the importance of this work, NOAA has a curious origin that has prevented the agency from reaching its full potential.

The agency was created by executive order under President Nixon in 1970, without Congress ever formally authorizing the agency's existence.

The best location for NOAA was the subject of debate, with some arguing that it should be placed within the Department of Interior, and others suggesting it be created as an independent agency within the executive branch.

Ultimately, the president chose to combine several prior existing administrations, bureaus, and agencies into a single entity within the Department of Commerce.

In the intervening years, NOAA's responsibilities and budgets have grown, while the debate about its proper home has continued with no widely accepted solution. NOAA exists through a patchwork of roughly 200 statutes that have resulted in an agency with complex organizational challenges and, at times, an ill-defined mission.

This can be frustrating for NOAA and its employees, as well as stakeholders who rely on its work and Congress as we attempt to provide oversight and legislation.

I unveiled a draft bill in December which would provide authorizing legislation, more commonly known as an organic act, for NOAA. This relatively short bill - only 22 pages long - would provide a framework for NOAA to be formally established as an independent agency within the executive branch.

It would elevate NOAA within the executive branch to an appropriate level alongside similar scientific agencies like NASA and the National Science Foundation.

This legislation would clearly state NOAA's important mission in statute. At the same time, this bill would provide a clean slate for NOAA to reorganize and streamline its operations, helping it to adapt and reset to a modern structure.

As part of this reorganization, the Office of Space Commerce would be taken out of NOAA and given greater standing within the Department of Commerce. Commercial space is a rapidly developing industry that will be a key component in the evolution of American competitiveness. It deserves the focus and leadership that will come with raising its profile within Commerce.

Importantly, this bill will provide the opportunity for greater accountability, by allowing Congress to engage in a level of oversight which has not been possible due to NOAA's unwieldy structure. This lack of cohesive direction has prevented us from examining the agency as a whole and has forced Congress to authorize its activities on a piecemeal basis.

I understand that the decision to elevate NOAA to an independent agency within the executive branch has drawn a fair bit of attention. However, my belief is that NOAA's mission and its important role in research and development warrant a placement outside of the Department of Commerce, where, often times, the agency can be considered an afterthought in the department's activities.

In short: this bill streamlines NOAA's operations. It makes it easier to carry out critical environmental research and weather forecasting.

It makes their operations more transparent to Congress and the public. And it enables NOAA to be a modern, flexible government agency that provides accurate, timely, and impactful services to Americans.

For more reasons than one, the time is right for this legislation.

Today's witnesses, each a former NOAA Administrator, represent a range of experiences at the agency and can provide first-hand insight into NOAA's operations and how an organic act will support its mission.

They, better than anyone, can give us firsthand accounts of what it's like to run a scientific agency while dealing with NOAA's unique organizational challenges. I encourage all my colleagues to listen closely as they point out the difficulties they faced and how an organic act can avoid these problems in the future.

I look forward to working with the Ranking Member, my colleagues, and other committees as we move forward in this process.

I now recognize the Ranking Member for her opening statement.