

ORAL TESTIMONY BY

RDML TIM GALLAUDET, PH.D., USN RET.

HEARING ON

THE FUTURE OF THE NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION (NOAA) AS AN
INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC AGENCY IN STATUTE

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY.
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Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Lofgren, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the NOAA Organic Act. Having served as the acting and Deputy NOAA Administrator, I witnessed first-hand the world class science, service, and stewardship of America's leading ocean, weather, and environmental agency. NOAA's team of top-notch scientists, staff, uniformed officers, and contractors positively impact every American life every day through lifesaving weather and water warnings. NOAA is also a leader in advancing America's growing blue economy through management of our national marine fisheries, updates to the nautical charts of our exclusive economic zone, precision navigation data for U.S. seaports, support to coastal tourism and recreation, and mapping and exploring of our oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes.

I wish to thank this Committee for supporting NOAA, and you, Chairman Lucas, for your leadership in drafting a bill to make NOAA an independent agency, which I support for two primary reasons. The first concerns NOAA's budget, which comprises over half of that of the Department of Commerce. This past year, millions of dollars of the agency's portfolio were once-again transferred to the Commerce Department's Working Capital Fund for Shared Services. The Department's own Inspector General found the program to have significant weaknesses, yet Commerce is moving forward this year with a massive \$353 million consolidation of its agencies' budget and grant management functions that have already experienced numerous delays and cost overruns.

Commerce's egregious extraction of NOAA funding is most evident when the Department falls short on its funding for the Decennial Census. Costs for the 2020 Census were over \$3 billion above initial estimates, while the unreliable cost assessments of the 2010 Census ultimately caused Commerce to send a last-minute Congressional request to reprogram funds to fill the gap. In these instances, the Commerce Department reallocated NOAA funding to the Census Bureau, and the only way NOAA could cope with such huge budget cuts was to delay critical upgrades to environmental satellites and other major programs.

The second reason to make NOAA independent concerns management. Paying the Department of Commerce to ineptly duplicate NOAA's own management system makes no business sense. A central problem is the lack of shared priorities between the two layers of government, which has produced chronic conflict, with NOAA on the receiving end of poorly crafted and sometimes damaging decisions.

There are two lenses through which I see the benefits of making NOAA independent. The first is the impact on NOAA's weather and climate services, where I see at least two positive results:

First, stabilizing the management and budget of NOAA's satellite programs by eliminating the aforementioned cuts from the Commerce Department. This will support the myriad of NOAA functions using satellite data, including the Earth Prediction Innovation Center, or EPIC, which we initiated during the last Administration to regain American leadership in weather modeling.

Second, accelerating the influx of innovation from public-private partnerships. During my tenure with NOAA, we initiated data and technology partnerships with leading innovators in the private sector to modernize NOAA's weather and satellite capabilities in the same way SpaceX is assisting NASA. Erratic and inconsistent budget profiles do not inspire confidence in industry, and an independent NOAA will more effectively advance initiatives like these.

The other lens through which I see the benefits of making NOAA independent is the agency's maritime mission. Less is known about the world's oceans than the surfaces of the Moon and Mars. This is concerning because the marine environment is as important if not more than space in the everyday lives of American citizens. The ocean is a critical conduit for global supply chains, the dominant domain for our great power competition with China, and a growing source of economic security through commercial fishing and offshore energy. NOAA is America's top ocean agency, and making it independent will have at least two important effects:

First, it will expand our understanding of America's oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes. While I was with NOAA, I initiated and oversaw the development of the National Ocean Mapping Exploration, and Characterization Strategy and Implementation Plan. NOAA will be even more effective in leading this effort if the agency's leadership is freed from the everyday deluge of distracting data calls and analysis requested by the Commerce Department.

Secondly, a modified version of Chairman Lucas' bill will accelerate the recovery of America's imperiled marine species. Because protection of endangered species and marine mammals is split between NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages over 90% of the species, Chairman Lucas's draft bill directs a feasibility study on combining them. I recommend the legislation move NOAA's protected species responsibilities to the Fish & Wildlife Service outright to more efficiently and effectively protect at-risk marine wildlife.

In summary, NOAA is not a good fit in the Commerce Department. The disparate goals of the Department and its largest subordinate agency have had a demonstrably adverse impact on NOAA's budget and management. An independent NOAA will not only ensure that America can better weather future storms, but it will also put NOAA's ocean missions on par with those of NASA for space and therefore more effectively address the dominant role of the maritime domain in America's national, natural, and economic security.

Thank you for supporting NOAA. I look forward to your questions.