COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH

For Immediate Release
July 14, 2015

Media Contact: Zachary Kurz
(202) 225-6371

Statement of Environment Subcommittee Chairman Jim Bridenstine (R-Okla.)
Advancing Commercial Weather Data: Collaborative Efforts to Improve Forecasts, Part II

Chairman Bridenstine: Today we are convening part two of a hearing we held in May on how the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA, uses weather data to enhance their forecasting capability, how and where they get that necessary data, and how these processes can be improved.

We have continually heard the word "robust" from multiple stakeholders when discussing the needs of our Nation's satellite infrastructure, and I agree. But after hearing these perspectives, particularly from our hearing with NOAA in February, I believe the correct word for our current satellite architecture is "fragile."

A gap in satellite data availability remains a very real threat. NOAA is taking the proper steps to mitigate this, but we still may be faced with an unprecedented gap in crucial weather data. We know that JPSS-1 has experienced delays and cost overruns, and we are now being told it is possible GOES-R will experience a slip from its planned March 2016 launch date.

This underscores the need to augment our space-based observing systems by incorporating alternative modes of data collection. For instance, a competitive, commercial market for weather data could drive innovation, reduce costs and increase the quantity and quality of data.

Through this Subcommittee's oversight, we learned that NOAA does in fact already purchase weather data from commercial entities, including lightning data, aircraft observations and synthetic aperture imagery for ice detection. Why not space-based weather data as well?

I have been encouraged by the forward-looking view of Stephen Volz, the head of NOAA NESDIS. He indicated that NOAA would be open to buying data from companies prepared to sell space-based weather data such as radio occultation and hyperspectral soundings. It was through our dialogue that we developed a concept for a pilot project to competitively select at least one provider of space-based data to test it against NOAA's proprietary data. With this pilot project, NOAA will be able to determine if the purchased data can be viably used in our numerical weather models.

This pilot program was included in H.R. 1561, the Lucas-Bridenstine Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act of 2015, which passed the House of Representatives unanimously. I am grateful to the Environment Subcommittee Ranking Member, the gentlelady from Oregon Ms. Bonamici, for her bipartisan efforts. I am also now encouraged by the Senate's interest in weather legislation and look forward to incorporating their ideas into our bill.

I am pleased to have NOAA here today to continue the discussion of weather data and how a system that integrates multiple data sources will look in the future as NOAA evolves with the weather enterprise. I hope we can have a productive conversation today to help inform Congress on the policies and laws in place that guide our data sharing practices. It is my understanding that NOAA adheres to the principles of World Meteorological Organization's Resolution 40, which states that environmental weather data is publically shared internationally.

While I agree with the intention of this policy, it could also have negative effects on the very people NOAA is trying to help. It could prevent markets from forming, thwart innovation, reduce the quantity of data available, perpetuate the existing government monopoly and cause costs to balloon. In short, this policy could work against our ability to predict timely and accurate weather events. If our policy requires a product to be given away free of charge, only the government will produce the product. In May, we learned that there are a few situations where NOAA applies a slightly different policy with success. NOAA contracts with some private entities and the nature of those contracts prohibits NOAA from giving the data away for free.

Further, we learned that not everybody around the world follows this policy. For instance, the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts does not make their model outputs available for free. Instead, nongovernment entities must purchase their forecasts. This is not the case in the rest of the world, where NOAA's forecasts are available to all without charge.

That leads me to believe that our international obligations are much more nuanced than the current interpretation. It seems that there may be room for NOAA's data policy to be set on a case-by-case basis rather than through a blanket policy.

I look forward to today's hearing and a meaningful discussion with today's witness. I yield back and recognize the Ranking Member, Ms. Bonamici.

###