

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici

Joint Subcommittee Hearing: Dysfunction in Management of Climate and Weather Satellites
Thursday, September 19, 2013

Thank you, Chairman Stewart and Chairman Broun, for holding the hearing today. Our constituents may spend little time thinking about weather satellites managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, but we have all at some point been transfixed by the images of hurricanes captured by NOAA's Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites. And we all benefit from the forecasts—especially of severe storms--that result from data collected in the polar and geostationary satellite systems.

On this Committee, we have been working on how to improve forecasting and protect the American public and economy from severe weather. Losing coverage from either the polar satellites or the geostationary satellites would seriously affect accurate weather forecasting.

Because of trouble and mismanagement in the polar program, it now appears virtually certain that we will have a gap in satellite coverage, perhaps for as long as three years. And there remains a chance, not a probability but a possibility, that we may face a gap in the geostationary satellites as well.

There was a time when we would all say that a gap in coverage was unacceptable. Now what is unacceptable is not having a viable plan to address such a gap.

With that in mind, the questions for our witnesses have to be:
How can we minimize the scope and length of the expected gap in the polar program,
How can we avoid a gap in the geostationary program, and
Are plans to fill gaps in coverage appropriately mature?

On the Joint Polar Satellite System program we have had eight years to determine how to handle a gap. As early as 2005, we were getting warnings of slips in schedule and instrument issues and cost growth. Today I am interested in hearing about NOAA's definitive plan for how to deal with a gap they know they will face for polar satellite data. On the GOES satellites, the potential for a gap has been slower in developing and still appears to be avoidable. However, even here, I would expect that NOAA has started to think about a contingency plan should the current satellites suffer early failure and the replacement satellite suffer further delay. Of course we all hope everything performs optimally, but also I would hope that prudent managers will develop a plan for failure.

I want to join Mr. Maffei in expressing my regret, and frankly surprise, that the Majority charter for this hearing suggests the problems in NOAA's satellite program are somehow tied to climate science. That simply is not true and anyone who wants to spend some time looking at the history of these programs would be hard pressed to identify climate as even a factor in the technical problems, schedule slips, or cost growth of the last eight years. Further, the majority charter seems to perpetuate what has become a common misconception on this committee: that *climate* research is the same thing as *climate change research*.

Colleagues, this is an issue that has been ongoing for years. My hope today is that we can set aside partisanship and find solutions to what really is a slow-moving, national tragedy. We should emerge from this hearing with a bipartisan commitment to work together and help ensure that NOAA is doing all that it can and should to manage these programs and plan for gaps. I also hope we can work together to support NOAA in getting the resources they need to continue to protect the American public. I look forward to hearing the witnesses from GAO, NOAA, and NASA discuss how the relevant agencies plan of action to address the looming satellite coverage gap and to keep these programs on track.