COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH

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Statement of Environment Subcommittee Chairman Chris Stewart (R-Utah)
Hearing on Dysfunction in Management of Weather and Climate Satellites

Chairman Stewart: Thank you, Dr. Broun, for holding this important hearing. The Science Committee has a long history overseeing the management of NOAA and NASA weather and climate satellite systems. Unfortunately, these programs have been rife with issues for more than a decade. Topics at issue today are also very timely as they relate to legislation being considered by this Committee, "The Weather Forecasting Improvement Act of 2013," which attempts to focus critical resources on developing a top notch weather forecasting system based on streamlined research-to-operations and a more reasonable balance of resources toward weather research.

All of our witnesses acknowledge the strong possibility of a data gap for one or both of our major weather satellite systems in a few short years. These satellites provide the majority of data for numerical weather prediction in this country, and a gap could be catastrophic for forecasting by the National Weather Service and our innovative weather enterprise. A potential gap in polar-orbiting or geostationary satellite data, combined with continuing issues with how NOAA develops, analyzes, procures and integrates other satellite and observational information, risks the permanent loss of U.S. leadership in weather forecasting. The writing is on the wall, and our current trajectory is unacceptable.

As the Government Accountability Office will testify, our geostationary and polar-orbiting programs, known as GOES and JPSS, have been plagued with cost overruns, technical issues, and delays. We need to consider the right mix of satellite technology to make timely, accurate, and effective forecasts to protect American lives and property.

For our polar orbiting satellites, not only is there a potential gap in the 2016 to 2018 timeframe, but there may also be issues between the first and second JPSS satellites in the early 2020s.

While the GOES-R program has made progress in completing testing for several components, the program has still missed several key milestones for both flight and ground segments. This has caused the launch date for GOES-R to slip from October 2015 to March 2016. There are also other technical problems on the horizon, including with the Geostationary Lightning Mapper, an instrument that also appears to duplicate some already-existing commercial capabilities.

Robust contingency planning and implementation of those plans as suggested by GAO is essential. We have seen that it has taken several years for NOAA to validate key products on the SUOMI-NPP satellite. Just after the Oklahoma tornadoes this year, a micrometeoroid appears to have hit an existing GOES satellite, turning all of its instruments off. Murphy's Law seems to be on full display when it comes to our weather satellites, and continued blue sky self-evaluations by NOAA could prevent us from dealing with these problems before they arise.

It has taken the Administration several years and the prodding of this Committee and GAO to fully acknowledge the very real risk of a data gap, and we need to look at all options to mitigate potential breakdowns in our forecasting ability. While NOAA has paid for reports to examine gap mitigation options I have fear that not enough has been done to pursue implementation of these backup plans. We need to look at American, and potentially commercial, sources for these critical data. It should be alarming that we may be in a position of having to rely on international partners for weather data to protect lives and property, an outcome that could raise much greater quality and access concerns than some of the potential commercial partners that have so far been rebuffed by NOAA.

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