

114TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 1573

To establish regional weather forecast offices, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

JUNE 15, 2015

Mr. THUNE introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

A BILL

To establish regional weather forecast offices, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “National Weather
5 Service Improvement Act”.

6 **SEC. 2. NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE.**

7 (a) ORGANIZATION.—The Administrator of the Na-
8 tional Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, through
9 the National Weather Service, shall develop a plan for es-
10 tablishing 6 regional weather forecast offices.

1 (b) PLAN CONTENTS.—The plan under subsection

2 (a) shall—

3 (1) whenever possible, prioritize locating a re-
4 gional weather forecast office together with—

5 (A) an institution of higher education (as
6 defined in section 101 of the Higher Education
7 Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1001)) with an active
8 meteorology department; or

9 (B) a State or Federal department or
10 agency;

11 (2) incorporate risk communication and deci-
12 sion support experts in the staffing model;

13 (3) ensure that local forecast quality will not be
14 degraded;

15 (4) to the extent practicable, incorporate the
16 best available science when determining schedules
17 for employees on shift work in order to minimize
18 stress on those employees, while providing sufficient
19 flexibility to temporarily increase staffing during se-
20 vere weather events;

21 (5) provide sufficient training to minimize em-
22 ployee displacement as a consequence of the plan;
23 and

1 (6) ensure that each regional weather forecast
2 office has on staff the expertise necessary to forecast
3 the severe weather events typical for the region.

4 (c) NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL PLAN REVIEW.—

5 The Secretary of Commerce shall contract with the Na-
6 tional Research Council of the National Academy of
7 Sciences—

8 (1) to conduct a review of the scientific and
9 technical soundness of the plan developed under sub-
10 section (a), including—

11 (A) an evaluation of the proposed staffing
12 model;

13 (B) an assessment of the statistical and
14 analytical measures that should be made for a
15 service area to form an adequate basis for de-
16 termining that there will be no degradation of
17 service; and

18 (C) such recommendations as the National
19 Research Council considers necessary for public
20 safety purposes; and

21 (2) to submit the review under paragraph (1) to
22 the Secretary not later than 1 year after the date of
23 enactment of this Act.

24 (d) PLAN IMPLEMENTATION.—Not later than 1 year
25 after the date of submission of the review under subsection

1 (c)(2), the Administrator of the National Oceanic and At-
2 mospheric Administration, through the National Weather
3 Service, shall implement the plan under subsection (a),
4 taking into consideration the recommendations of the Na-
5 tional Research Council under subsection (c)(1)(C).

6 (e) REGIONAL WEATHER FORECAST OFFICES.—

7 (1) ESTABLISHMENT.—

8 (A) FIRST REGIONAL WEATHER FORECAST
9 OFFICE.—Not later than 3 years after the date
10 of enactment of this Act, the first regional
11 weather forecast office shall be established.

12 (B) REMAINING REGIONAL WEATHER
13 FORECAST OFFICES.—Except as provided in
14 subparagraph (A), each regional weather fore-
15 cast office shall be established not later than 5
16 years after the date of enactment of this Act.

17 (2) FORECAST CENTRALIZATION.—Not later
18 than 6 months after the date that each regional
19 weather forecast office is established under para-
20 graph (1), the Secretary of Commerce shall transfer
21 the weather forecast functions, along with necessary
22 staff, from each applicable weather forecast office to
23 adequately staff the regional weather forecast office.

24 (f) WARNING COORDINATION METEOROLOGISTS.—

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—The National Weather Serv-
2 ice shall hire or retain at least 1 warning coordina-
3 tion meteorologist at each weather forecast office.

4 (2) RESPONSIBILITIES.—A warning coordina-
5 tion meteorologist shall—

6 (A) be responsible for providing service to
7 the geographic area of responsibility that was
8 previously covered by a weather forecast office
9 before the date of enactment of this Act;

10 (B) interface with users of National
11 Weather Service products and services, such as
12 the public, media outlets, users in the aviation,
13 marine, and agricultural communities, and for-
14 estry, land, and water management interests, to
15 evaluate the adequacy and usefulness of the
16 products and services;

17 (C) collaborate with the appropriate re-
18 gional weather forecast office and State, local,
19 and tribal government agencies, as applicable,
20 in developing, proposing, and implementing
21 plans to develop, modify, or tailor National
22 Weather Service products and services to im-
23 prove their usefulness;

24 (D) ensure the maintenance and accuracy
25 of severe weather call lists, appropriate office

1 severe weather policy or procedures, and other
2 severe weather or dissemination methodologies
3 or strategies;

4 (E) work closely with State, local, and trib-
5 al emergency management agencies, and other
6 agencies related to disaster management, to en-
7 sure a planned, coordinated, and effective pre-
8 paredness effort; and

9 (F) whenever possible, be located together
10 with State or local emergency managers.

11 (3) ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES.—A warn-
12 ing coordination meteorologist may—

13 (A) work with relevant State government
14 agencies in developing plans for promoting
15 more effective use of National Weather Service
16 products and services throughout the State;

17 (B) identify priority community prepared-
18 ness objectives;

19 (C) develop plans to meet the objectives
20 identified in subparagraph (B); and

21 (D) conduct severe weather event pre-
22 paredness planning and citizen education efforts
23 with and through various State, local, and trib-
24 al government agencies, and other disaster
25 management-related organizations.

1 (g) FORECAST INVESTMENTS AND IMPROVE-
 2 MENTS.—For at least 10 years after the date of enactment
 3 of this Act, any savings realized by the Department of
 4 Commerce by the centralization of weather forecast func-
 5 tions under subsection (e)(2) shall be used to improve the
 6 weather forecasts produced by the National Oceanic and
 7 Atmospheric Administration, including—

8 (1) by expanding super-computing capacity;

9 (2) by investing in research to improve weather
 10 forecasts;

11 (3) by improving the communication of weather
 12 forecasts to the public, particularly with respect to
 13 severe weather;

14 (4) by obtaining ground-based observations that
 15 would improve weather forecasts; and

16 (5) by improving radar coverage where nec-
 17 essary, with an emphasis on high density population
 18 centers with no radar coverage.

19 (h) DEFINITION OF STATE.—In this section, the term
 20 “State” means a State, a territory or possession of the
 21 United States, including a Commonwealth, or the District
 22 of Columbia.

23 **SEC. 3. SEVERE WEATHER EVENTS COMMUNICATION.**

24 (a) PURPOSE.—For purposes of preparing the rec-
 25 ommendations under subsection (b)(1)(B) and imple-

1 menting the new system under subsection (c), the purpose
2 of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
3 system for issuing severe weather watches and warnings
4 shall be to reduce the loss of life due to severe weather
5 events.

6 (b) EVALUATION.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 2 years after
8 the date of enactment of this Act, the Administrator
9 of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Adminis-
10 tration shall—

11 (A) evaluate whether the National Oceanic
12 and Atmospheric Administration system for
13 issuing severe weather watches and warnings
14 meets the purpose under subsection (a); and

15 (B) submit to Congress a report on the
16 evaluation under subparagraph (A) and rec-
17 ommendations for how the system can be im-
18 proved and for any research necessary to ad-
19 dress the areas described in paragraph (2).

20 (2) CONTENTS.—The evaluation shall focus on
21 the following areas:

22 (A) Ways to more clearly communicate to
23 the public the risks presented by a severe
24 weather event.

1 (B) Ways to more broadly disseminate a
2 severe weather watch or warning to the public.

3 (C) Ways that a severe weather watch or
4 warning could help to reduce the loss of life due
5 to an extreme weather event.

6 (3) CONSULTATION.—In developing the report,
7 the Administrator shall—

8 (A) consult with relevant line offices within
9 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Admin-
10 istration, such as the National Ocean Service,
11 the National Weather Service, and the Office of
12 Oceanic and Atmospheric Research;

13 (B) consult with the academic sector, in-
14 cluding individuals in the field of social
15 sciences, and other weather services;

16 (C) consult with media outlets that will be
17 distributing the watches and warnings; and

18 (D) utilize the services of the National
19 Academy of Sciences, as necessary.

20 (c) IMPLEMENTATION.—Not later than 4 years after
21 the date of enactment of this Act, and if no additional
22 action is taken by Congress regarding the National Oce-
23 anic and Atmospheric Administration severe weather
24 watches and warnings system, the Administrator of the
25 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shall

1 implement, based on the evaluation and report under sub-
2 section (a), a new system for issuing severe weather
3 watches and warnings.

4 **SEC. 4. REPORT ON CONTRACT POSITIONS AT THE NA-**
5 **TIONAL WEATHER SERVICE.**

6 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days after the
7 date of enactment of this Act, and annually thereafter for
8 5 fiscal years, the Administrator of the National Oceanic
9 and Atmospheric Administration shall submit to Congress
10 a report on the use of full-time equivalent contractors at
11 the National Weather Service for the most recently com-
12 pleted fiscal year.

13 (b) CONTENTS.—The report shall include—

14 (1) the total number of full-time equivalent em-
15 ployees at the National Weather Service;

16 (2) the total number of full-time equivalent con-
17 tractors at the National Weather Service;

18 (3) the 5 most common positions filled by full-
19 time equivalent contractors at the National Weather
20 Service;

21 (4) of the contract positions identified in para-
22 graph (3), the percentage of full-time equivalent con-
23 tractors in those positions that have held a prior po-
24 sition at the National Weather Service or the Na-
25 tional Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration;

1 (5) the average full-time equivalent salary for
2 Federal employees at the National Weather Service;

3 (6) the average full-time equivalent salary for
4 contractors at the National Weather Service; and

5 (7) a description of any actions taken by the
6 Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmos-
7 pheric Administration to respond to the issues raised
8 by the Department of Commerce Inspector General
9 regarding the hiring of former National Oceanic and
10 Atmospheric Administration employees as contrac-
11 tors at the National Weather Service, such as the
12 issues raised in the Investigative Report dated June
13 2015 (OIG-12-0447).

○