



COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Lamar Smith, Chairman

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Statement from Oversight Subcommittee Chairman Barry Loudermilk (R-Ga.)

An Overview of the Nation's Weather Satellite Programs and Policies

Chairman Loudermilk: Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing today. We are here today to hear from GAO and NOAA regarding the polar orbiting and geostationary satellite programs. The JPSS and GOES-R programs that NOAA maintains have experienced setbacks. We intend to hear today what has changed since our last hearing in February of this year.

Earlier this year, GAO published a report detailing its concern that the NOAA polar satellite program, JPSS, is facing an unprecedented gap in satellite data. GAO believes that, while JPSS remains within its new life-cycle cost estimate and schedule baselines, recent rises in component costs and technical issues during development increase the likelihood of a near-term data gap. Additionally, although NOAA has recently reduced its estimated potential gap from 15 to only 3 months, GAO noted that this assessment was based on incomplete data, such as the risks posed by space debris to satellite hardware. This is even more concerning given the recent break up of a retired NOAA satellite in orbit. GAO estimated in its report that a data gap may occur earlier and last longer than NOAA anticipates.

Perhaps even more troubling is the potential data gap facing NOAA's GOES-R program, the geostationary satellite system. Since its inception, the GOES-R program has undergone significant increases in cost and reductions in scope, and as GAO's report indicates, NOAA has yet to reverse or even halt this trend, as we have seen with the most recent delay to the launch, pushing a March 2016 launch date back to October 2016. This means we could be facing a long period without a backup satellite in orbit. History has shown us that backups are sometimes necessary to reduce risk to public safety and the economy. In 2008 and 2012, the agency was forced to use backup satellites to cover problems with operational satellites, a solution we may once again find ourselves needing.

When talking about the consequences of a gap in weather data, the first thought in the minds of many is of the devastating effects of extreme weather on the ground. However, professional and personal history lends me the experience to discuss the impact of gap weather data on: aviation weather. As a private pilot, I know the importance of having accurate and timely weather forecasts to assess flying conditions. Pilots require accurate weather data to evaluate conditions on the ground and in the sky throughout the entire flight process, from takeoff to landing. Without accurate data a pilot runs the risk of "getting behind the plane", a general aviation phrase which means that the plane is responding to the weather and the pilot is responding to the plane, a situation that spells trouble for even the most seasoned pilots.

From this perspective, you can see how a gap in weather data, and consequently less-accurate forecasts, could negatively affect not only commercial flight safety, but also the \$1.5 trillion in total economic activity that the aviation industry contributes to the national economy.

I hope that today's hearing will shed some light on the complex schedule and cost demands facing NOAA's weather satellite programs and that the Subcommittees will walk away better equipped to consider these issues moving forward.

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