

COMMITTEE ON
**SCIENCE, SPACE, AND
TECHNOLOGY**
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH



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Statement of Oversight Subcommittee Chairman Barry Loudermilk
Bridging the Gap: America's Weather Satellites and Weather Forecasting

Chairman Loudermilk: Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing today. This is our first joint Environment and Oversight Subcommittee hearing of the 114th Congress, and I look forward to working with you on the oversight of environmental issues important to us both.

We are here today to hear from GAO, NOAA, and NASA regarding the progress of NOAA's polar orbiting and geostationary satellite programs, respectively JPSS and GOES-R, as well as how the data collected by weather satellites turns into weather forecasts depended on by so many in the United States, and quite frankly, around the world.

GAO recently 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 notes that this assessment was based on incomplete data, such as the risks posed by space debris to satellite hardware. GAO estimates 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. The program was originally planned to launch mid-2012, a date that has now been pushed back to March of 2016. NOAA will retire one of its two operational satellites this year and move its backup satellite into orbit. This means we will face a period of up to 17 months 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. My professional and personal history, however, demands that I discuss another type of weather with which I have quite a bit of experience: aviation weather. As a private pilot, I know the importance of having accurate and timely weather forecasts to assess flying conditions. Pilots must evaluate conditions on the ground and in the sky throughout the entire flight process, from takeoff to landing. If a pilot does not know which aviation-specific weather conditions to expect, such as embedded thunderstorms, turbulence, and freeze levels, that 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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