

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
“Establishing an Independent NOAA”  
Written Statement of Dr. Neil Jacobs

Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Lofgren, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing on a topic that is not only near and dear to me, but also important for the future of our country’s scientific leadership.

NOAA has a unique mission that spans the ocean floor to the sun’s surface. They are entrusted with the responsibility to provide critical information to the public that enables informed decisions on a wide range of phenomena spanning a broad spectrum of temporal and spatial scales. It was a tremendous honor to help lead such a distinguished organization of scientists, engineers, forecasters, and uniformed officers, while performing the duties of the NOAA Administrator.

While at NOAA, I developed a deep appreciation for the dedication and professionalism of the entire workforce. From issuing life-saving forecasts of complex weather events, managing fish stocks, mapping our coasts, and launching satellites into space, their dedication to the mission is unparalleled across government. NOAA’s mission impacts every American every day. While the services NOAA provides arguably offer the greatest return on taxpayer investment, it is stunning to know the agency was created by an Executive Order and has never been officially authorized by Congress.

Because NOAA has such a diverse set of mission requirements, where it should exist, or whether it should retain its existing structure, has been an ongoing discussion. There are valid arguments across the spectrum regarding what it should look like, but one thing I believe we can all agree on is that NOAA needs an Organic Act. When it comes to an Organic Act that creates an independent NOAA, there are some tradeoffs that Congress should consider.

Having a Secretary-level position promoting NOAA equities does have some advantages. A Secretary can communicate and amplify NOAA’s mission and priorities to a wider audience, both externally and internally; however, this assumes the Department’s priorities are aligned with NOAA’s mission. Likewise, balancing budget priorities across all the bureaus in the Department of Commerce (DOC) has always been a challenge for NOAA. Does the tradeoff of an independent NOAA outweigh benefits of being part of a larger DOC budget? That will likely come down to future mission prioritization in the face of rapidly growing weather, water, and climate-related risk exposure.

In some cases, the layer of Department staff and employees above NOAA can have the added benefit of additional expertise and institutional knowledge. The dedicated workforce of DOC has provided NOAA with additional resources when planning long-term government missions that span not just science, but economic and international policy considerations. A question worth considering is if NOAA will have the ability to independently supplement this support.

Trade-offs aside, there are many significant and distinct advantages. The ability to effectively map budget decisions to agency priorities is a crucial aspect of meeting mission

requirements. This may sound obvious, but the current structure results in a process inconsistent with this goal.

Having the freedom and flexibility to communicate is critical for success. This is not unique to a science agency, or even the public sector. Communication is a fundamental tenant of all aspects of leadership. Additional layers of approval and clearance, while well intended, often inhibit leadership's ability to connect with the employees carrying out the public service mission.

Likewise, the pride of knowing your agency will receive the recognition it deserves for the critical services it provides cannot be emphasized enough. This is largely related to lack of branding. NOAA is often compared to NASA during interagency coordination, but the public does not see it that way. Most everyone has heard of the National Weather Service, yet not many people know it is part of NOAA, and they are even more surprised to learn NOAA is part of DOC. Up until the most recent paint jobs on NOAA's hurricane hunters, the planes were doing hurricane awareness tours with giant words painted on the side: "United States Department of Commerce".

While there may be some benefits to being in DOC, branding and name recognition will remain a challenge, as NOAA will continue to struggle to establish an identity apart from DOC. This may seem like a trivial issue, but in my opinion, it is the single most important thing driving NOAA's future budgets and workforce recruitment.

Lastly, transparent, objective, and defensible science requires autonomy. To quote NOAA's mission: "Science provides the foundation and future promise of the service and stewardship elements of NOAA's mission." While tight budgets, combined with changing priorities, will always play a role in any organization, the additional layers of bureaucracy in the current structure often do not add value to the scientific aspect of NOAA's mission. NOAA, at its core, is a scientific agency, which is often specialized beyond the expertise of DOC.

If all these various trade-offs were easy, this would have happened a long time ago. I commend Chairman Lucas for taking on this longstanding issue. I would also like to thank the Committee for their bipartisan support of NOAA. Finally, I would like to thank all the amazing employees of NOAA for the wonderful service they provide to the American people. It was truly a privilege to work for them.

Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Lofgren, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for inviting me to participate today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.