



Testimony of Don McKinnon
On Behalf of the Mississippi Civil Defense and Emergency
Management Association

Before the Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment
And the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
Committee on Science and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives

“Tracking the Storm at the National Hurricane Center”

July 19, 2007

Chairman Lampson, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Inglis, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner, and distinguished members of the Subcommittees, I thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to provide testimony regarding the service provided by the National Weather Service’s Southern Regional Office during Mr. Bill Proenza’s tenure.

I am Don McKinnon, Director of the Jones County Emergency Management Agency, Laurel, Mississippi. I am representing the Mississippi Civil Defense and Emergency Management Association (MCDEMA), which has 300 members from all 82 counties in Mississippi. Since 2000 the State of Mississippi has had 11 Presidential Disaster Declarations, 9 Small Business Administration (SBA) Disaster Declarations and 19 Governor State of Emergencies. I have worked in the emergency management agency in Jones County for approximately 26 years. I have been the Director since 2001. Emergency Management is a coordinating agency responsible for maintaining emergency plans, preparedness, response, disaster exercises, recovery, and mitigation projects. We work with all public safety agencies, local, state, and federal, as well as volunteer and non-emergency agencies. One of our primary missions is to prepare for and respond to weather-related events. We in Jones County are no strangers to tornadoes, floods and hurricanes. I am responsible for responding to all of them. We also have incidents that are not caused by weather that we rely on the National Weather Service (NWS) to assist us with. For example, chemical spills, hazardous shipment accidents, bridge collapse, fire, search and rescue, etc. Current, accurate, and timely weather information plays a significant role in each of these incidents. The accessibility and the willingness of the NWS to

help emergency management are critical in our Incident Action Plans as we prepare for and respond to these incidents.

Jones County, Mississippi, is located approximately 100 miles inland from the Mississippi Gulf Coast. When Hurricane Katrina slammed into Mississippi on August 29, 2005, we suffered everything the Gulf Coast suffered except the storm surge. We had 130 + mph sustained winds with gusts much greater. We had 250 homes destroyed, 650 homes with major damage and several thousand homes with minor damage. We suffered 7 Hurricane Katrina related deaths. Remember we are 100 miles inland from the coast.

Over the past 6 years in my tenure as the Emergency Management Director I have had the opportunity to work with the Southeastern Regional Director of the National Weather Service Mr. Bill Proenza on many occasions. I first met Mr. Proenza at a Mississippi Civil Defense Emergency Management Association conference. Mr. Proenza was speaking to the conference attendees on the importance of the National Weather Service and the Emergency Management Community working together to achieve more success in warning our citizens of impending weather events. Mr. Proenza was passionate about his topic and would later meet with conference attendees to network individually and continue his discussion. Mr. Proenza would always solicit comments from the local emergency managers and took their concerns to heart. Mr. Proenza convinced me that the NWS could be more than a reactive weather source and could, in fact, serve as a proactive weather resource working with the emergency management community.

Not only did Mr. Proenza come to us, he asked us to come to him. Mr. Proenza encouraged the local weather offices to involve emergency management in their outreach activities. The National Weather Service Office in Jackson, Mississippi, partnered with the Mississippi Civil Defense Emergency Management Association to develop an eight hour training course geared toward the emergency management community and the interaction with the NWS. Then the NWS offices from Slidell, LA, Memphis, TN, and Mobile, AL were invited to attend so the emergency management customers they serve could interact with them. Some of the topics included understanding the Doppler Radar, understanding the products produced and offered by the NWS and tracking specific events that had occurred. Now the training is offered annually and available to

emergency management and the media. Mr. Proenza recognized that there are, aside from the general public, two core customers, emergency management and the media, that needed personal and daily interaction with the National Weather Service. He fostered an environment within the Southeastern Regional NWS that allowed his personnel to work with and meet the needs of the customers they served.

Mr. Proenza was deeply involved in the development of the NWS Southern Region program “Turn Around, Don’t Drown”. Flooding is the number one cause of drowning deaths in the United States. Realizing that the National Weather Service could do more to educate the public on what they should and should not do during a flood Mr. Proenza solicited information from the NWS Offices in his region. The Warning Coordination Meteorologist in San Angelo, TX came up with the “Turn Around, Don’t Drown” theme. Mr. Proenza recognized the benefit the program could have on saving lives and brought the program to the emergency management community. Once he sold the EMs on the program he promoted the program across the United States. The next time you hear that slogan, remember where it came from. Without Mr. Proenza we would not have it.

Not one to just continue a practice because “that is the way we have always done it”, Mr. Proenza encouraged the NWS Southern Region Headquarters Staff to develop a computer program that would give a graphic display of severe weather information on the NWS Radar sites on the internet. Users could already see the weather cells or lines moving into their areas but when a watch or warning was issued that information was not visible on the Internet site. Mr. Proenza knew that emergency management and the public needed more and that’s what he gave them. Now when a flood, storm or tornado watch or warning is issued they get a graphic box showing the area affected simultaneously with the weather on the NWS Radar page of the Internet. Not only do you get visual representation, if you click on a county/parish in the box you get the text message associated with the watch or warning. You will know the program as Radar Integrated Display with Geospatial Elements or RIDGE. Without Mr. Proenza to institute changes and growth in the NWS Southern Region we may not have the RIDGE System. What we had, worked. Mr. Proenza knew that it could work better and provide more useful information to a public who needed it. That’s what we have because Mr. Proenza would accept no less.

Mr. Proenza was contacted in 2004 by a local emergency management director in a small rural county about a problem with the NOAA weather radio system in their area. This is a county with a population of approximately 22,000 people. Mr. Proenza met with the local officials and listened as they explained their concerns. Mr. Proenza then went to work for them. In late 2005 the county received equipment to replace the defunct system. The County now has a working NOAA weather radio system and the citizens of Carthage, Mississippi, can rest easier knowing that they will get timely weather information that may save their lives. I later learned that Mr. Proenza had repeated this process in several other counties in Mississippi. Not only did he follow through with the equipment that he promised, he personally followed up on the resolution of the problems to ensure that the systems were performing as they should and nothing else was needed. Mr. Proenza was instrumental in making these systems functional.

Problems are plentiful in the emergency management business. Mr. Proenza is not afraid to face these problems with us when they concern the National Weather Service. Jones County as well as many other counties in the state was plagued by inefficient coverage by the new (1993) NWS Jackson Doppler Radar system. Simply stated, it did not cover my county the way it was designed to. In defense of the NWS it was designed to give full coverage to the NWS Jackson coverage area of which my county is a part. But when construction was started on the site, the Federal Aviation Administration notified the NWS Jackson office that the tower housing the radar would have to be lowered by 10 meters (30 feet) because of the proximity to the Jackson International Airport. Having no alternative site the construction had to proceed. From day one the radar coverage was degraded by approximately 50 percent in the eastern part of the state. This was because of a terrain issue. What did this mean to the radar coverage? It meant that the forecasters could not accurately monitor rain data and wind data below 6 to 8 thousand feet. Unless a storm was well above 6 to 8 thousand feet then the forecasters could possibly miss it, as was the case in November of 2001 in Jones County. A small tornado touched down in west Jones County at approximately 7:20 P.M. and destroyed several homes. The West Jones High School and Middle School received major damage. NWS officials came to Jones County the next day and explained that they simply did not see the storm. Mr. Proenza was aware of the Doppler Radar problem and was working to correct it. He kept me updated. The emergency management community wrote many letters of support in this push to get the radar moved to a more suitable location. Finally the radar was moved in

2002 to a site in Rankin County, Mississippi, approximately 7 miles from the original site. Coverage has improved tremendously and we have not had any “surprises” since the move. Without Mr. Proenza’s support and tenacity we may not have achieved the move. He made it happen and my citizens are safer because of it.

Mr. Proenza asked for my input on an issue concerning the National Weather Service name and logo a number of years ago. NOAA wanted to change the name and the logo of the National Weather Service to the NOAA Weather Service. This came as a surprise to me and quite honestly I was baffled by the proposed change. The NWS is a national brand name. It is trusted and credible with a history going back over 130 years. The logo represents quality and knowledge in the weather service. To change the name for no more reason than to just change the name doesn’t make sense to me. I understand that this is still an issue.

More recently Mr. Proenza asked me to represent the emergency management community in the interview process to replace the retiring NWS Jackson Warning Coordination Meteorologist (WCM). I had worked with the outgoing WCM for many years and had grown to trust and respect his opinion. Finding a suitable replacement was going to be a challenge. We found a very capable applicant. Before the applicant was approved for the position Mr. Proenza called me to make sure I was comfortable with the applicant and that this person would be a good fit in our emergency management programs. I am happy to report that the new WCM has been well received by emergency management and has brought with him many new and useful ideas. Mr. Proenza did not have to include the emergency management community in this process. However, he recognized the importance of this position to emergency management and took the step to include us in selecting the person we would be working so closely with.

Recently NOAA was considering a “concept of operations” which would have resulted in lowering NWS field office staffing and hours of operation of some field offices. Mr. Proenza defended the much-needed local presence of full time service and stood with local emergency managers to question this dangerous concept. I know my meteorologists and they know me. They know where Jones County is and what the terrain is like here. We work together to inform and protect the public. The meteorologists in NWS Jackson, Mississippi, treat Jones County as more than a statistical spot on a map. We were grateful that as a result of questions raised by Congress and

particularly this committee that proposal is on hold. We are concerned that Mr. Proenza's defending the interests of public safety and the emergency management community may have brought retribution on him.

Mr. Proenza is a dedicated servant of the American people. If you are uncomfortable with straight, honest, truthful answers to the hard questions then don't ask Mr. Proenza the question. Because that's what you are going to get, the truth. Mr. Proenza has always been accessible and approachable. He really cares about the public he represents. When I learned that Mr. Proenza had been appointed the Director of the National Hurricane Center I was extremely happy and at the same time I was sorry to see him leave managing the Southern Regional Office of the NWS. However, The NHC is a vital part of Mississippi's emergency management program. The information provided to me and the State of Mississippi from the NHC in times of emergency is critical in the decision making process of my Emergency Operations Center.

Mr. Proenza is an advocate for the people he serves and when he encounters problems he faces them head on. If it is broken, he wants it repaired. If it is working correctly, he wants it improved. In my dealings with Mr. Proenza he has never been one to sit back and watch things happen. He is on the forefront making things happen. Sadly it seems that he made the mistake of trying to improve the National Hurricane Center.

It has been an honor and a pleasure to come to our Capital to meet with distinguished leaders of our Nation's Congress and present this testimony on behalf of Mr. Proenza's leadership at the NWS Southern Regional Office. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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