

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT**

HEARING CHARTER

Tracking the Storm at the National Hurricane Center

Thursday, July 19, 2007
10:00 AM - 12:00 P.M.
2318 Rayburn House Office Building

Purpose

The Subcommittee on Energy and Environment and the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight will meet on July 19, 2007, to evaluate recent events at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Tropical Prediction Center (TPC/NHC).

Upon the orders of NOAA's Administrator, Conrad Lautenbacher, an Assessment Team was formed to review the operations of the tropical prediction center. In response to the Assessment Team's preliminary reports, the Vice Admiral placed Center Director X. William (Bill) Proenza on administrative leave. NOAA Administrator Lautenbacher stated that "...current conditions at the TPC pose an obstacle to the team's completion of its work, as well as the Team's concern that, as expressed by many of you, there currently exists a level of anxiety and disruption that threatens the TPC's ability to fulfill its mission to protect the American people...." This hearing will explore the process that culminated in Mr. Proenza's removal.

Witnesses

Panel 1

1. **Mr. X. William Proenza**, Director, Tropical Prediction Center, National Hurricane Center, National Centers for Environmental Prediction, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, has been invited to discuss his service as Director of the Tropical Prediction Center/National Hurricane Center and his experiences during the recent events that led the NOAA Administrator to place him on leave.

Panel 2

2. **Dr. Robert Atlas**, Director of the Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Dr. Atlas's laboratory is part of the Hurricane Research Division, which works with the Tropical Prediction Center to improve tools and techniques in hurricane forecasting. He has been asked to

focus on the use of QuikSCAT data in the forecasting process.

3. **Mr. Don McKinnon**, Director, Jones County (MS) Emergency Management Agency, will testify regarding services the National Weather Service (NWS) provides to emergency management offices. Mr. McKinnon dealt extensively with Mr. Proenza during his service as Director of the Weather Service Southern Region Office.
4. **Mr. Robie Robinson**, Director, Dallas County Office of Security and Emergency Management, is testifying on behalf of the Emergency Management Association of Texas regarding the service provided to the emergency management community in Texas by the National Weather Service (NWS) through the Southern Region Office during the period of Mr. Proenza's tenure as its Director.

Panel 3

5. **Hon. Conrad Lautenbacher**, Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.), Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and Administrator, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, has been asked to describe how he decided to dispatch an Assessment Team to the Tropical Prediction Center and, as a result of a preliminary report from that team, to place Mr. Proenza on leave. The team was directed to submit a report on the situation at the Center on Friday, July 20, 2007.
6. **Dr. James Turner**, Deputy Director of National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), led the assessment team at the request of Admiral Lautenbacher and will testify on the assessment and the findings of the assessment team's report.

Background

The National Hurricane Center (NHC) is publicly known as the unit of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration responsible for tracking and forecasting of tropical storms and hurricanes. Organizationally, the Center is a branch of the Tropical Prediction Center (TPC) of the National Center for Environmental Prediction (NCEP) and Mr. Proenza's actual title is Director of the Tropical Prediction Center. The Center assists emergency management agencies in the coastal states by providing information on the development of storms, their likely track across the ocean and their probable point of landfall on the U.S. coast. With this information, state and local officials make decisions about whether to evacuate threatened areas.

Mr. Proenza became director of the Tropical Prediction Center in January 2007, succeeding Max Mayfield. In his previous post as Director of the NWS Southern Regional Office, he managed some 1,000 employees from New Mexico to the Virgin Islands between 1998 and 2006. An employee of the Service for 35 years, he began at the National Hurricane Center as a flight meteorologist aboard the "hurricane hunter" aircraft that support Center operations. Among his awards during his service was recognition as Manager of the Year from the National Weather Service Employees' Organization.

On March 16, Mr. Proenza gave an interview to the Associated Press. That article described him

seeking "hundreds of millions of dollars for expanded research and predictions." It then described his "immediate concern" to be the QuikSCAT satellite, specifically the age of the satellite, the lack of any replacement if it failed, and the potential cost and time needed to for replacement. He stated that QuikSCAT's failure would reduce the accuracy of their two-day predictions by 10 percent and 16 percent for three-day forecasts.

In a telephone interview with Committee staff, Mr. Proenza was asked how QuikSCAT had come to his attention. He responded that while he was visiting the Center to discuss transition issues in December 2006, he had been approached by Senior Hurricane Specialist Richard Knabb and Michael Brennan, who was affiliated with both the Center and the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. Both had participated in a June 2006 Center workshop on requirements for ocean surface vector winds (which QuikSCAT measures). Mr. Proenza told staff he had read the report, and noted the statements there by both Mr. Knabb and Hugh Cobb, lead forecaster in the Center's Tropical Forecast and Analysis Branch about QuikSCAT's value. Proenza told Committee staff that he had discussed the workshop report with his managers in the Weather Service two days after assuming his job. Proenza also said that, while on the way to the AP interview, he had called Center Deputy Director (now Acting Director) Dr. Edward Rappaport and received the figures quoted in the interview.

In his presentation at the National Hurricane Conference in April, Mr. Proenza again expressed concern over QuikSCAT. His presentation chart called for "a next-generation QuikSCAT on an accelerated timetable (consistent with recommendation by the NRC Decadal Survey). Estimated cost: \$375-400 million." He said that issues like this demonstrated that more funding needed to be devoted to improving hurricane research and forecasting. An article in the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* quoted Senior Specialist Knabb at the same conference saying that the satellite had "...helped the National Hurricane Center [achieve] record accuracy in predicting the path of 10 systems."

On June 11, NOAA's Assistant Administrator for Program Planning and Integration, Mary Glackin, became acting Director of the National Weather Service after D.L Johnson's retirement. On June 14, she visited with Mr. Proenza at his office in Miami and delivered a memorandum entitled "Operating Procedures/Instructions." The memorandum listed cases when "you [Mr. Proenza] may have disregarded the direct instructions of your supervisor... or have made decisions on your own which you had no authority to make." The memorandum also discussed Mr. Proenza's interactions with the news media. He was instructed to conform to the procedures in the new Department Order on "Public Communications" (which had only become effective in May), and was told that "your recent statements... may have caused some unnecessary confusion about NOAA's ability to accurately predict tropical storms," and commented about "unnecessary detrimental effects on our organization, for example: requiring me to spend a disproportionate amount of time to correct any confusion; causing undue concern and misunderstanding among your staff, and; taking valuable time away from your public role as the NOAA official responsible for instilling confidence in our tropical storm predictions...."

Staffs Science and Technology Committee and the Energy and Commerce Committee met with Ms. Glackin and with Louis Uccellini, Director of the National Centers for Environmental Prediction (and Mr. Proenza's immediate supervisor) on July 12. Ms. Glackin stated that the

memorandum was not intended as a reprimand. She stated it was prepared after she talked to Mr. Uccellini and came to believe Mr. Proenza was not following procedures. The items cited in the memorandum were drawn from incidents recorded by Mr. Uccellini: one case where Mr. Proenza signed a promotion form for an employee (Mr. Uccellini's responsibility, a second case was stopped before it completed processing) and a case where Mr. Proenza approved change-of-station expenses outside the procedure approved by the NOAA Corporate Board. Mr. Uccellini said that he had only learned about the incident where Mr. Proenza's change of name to "National Hurricane Center" set off warning alarms after the fact, and that the change occurred without necessary notification to Congress and a 60-day waiting period. At this meeting, Mr. Uccellini also characterized Mr. Proenza - whom he had worked with in the past - as a dedicated employee, with a reputation for going around channels and being disruptive. Ms. Glackin described Proenza as receptive and cooperative, but she notes that the memo was in the press by the next day and she believes that Mr. Proenza must have leaked his own "repremand" memo to the press--though there is no convincing proof of that.

"A couple of days" after delivering this memorandum to Mr. Proenza, Ms. Glackin says she received a call (at another point, she said she received an e-mail) from Ahsha Tribble, the Executive Officer (who came to the position just last September after serving as Technical Chief of Staff to James Mahoney--now retired, but she is seen also as being close to Admiral Lautenbacher and/or his staff) at the Center. Ms. Tribble apparently indicated there were a number of employees who wanted to bring their concerns to the attention of management. In a call with multiple employees arranged by Ms. Tribble, Ms. Glackin says the employees expressed discomfort with the work environment at the Center, felt that their opinions were being misrepresented, and that the Center would not be "cohesive" in a hurricane situation. Ms. Glackin said she raised these concerns "vigorously" with her superiors. It was sometime after this point that the "operational assessment team" was formed at the direction of Admiral Lautenbacher. The team was headed by the Deputy Director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology, James Turner, and including John Guenther, an attorney from the Employment and Labor Law Division of the Department of Commerce Office of General Counsel. The charge to this group was issued on July 29, 2007 - approximately 10 days after Ms. Glackin had received allegations from NHC staff.

On July 2, Mr. Proenza told Committee staff he received a call from Admiral Lautenbacher that the team had been dispatched; they arrived at his office while the call was still in progress. It seemed apparent to him that others in the Center were already aware that the team was coming. Mr. Proenza met with Turner, and an "all-hands" meeting with the Center staff followed.

On July 4, the Miami *Herald* reported that Senior Specialists Richard Knabb and James Franklin - along with a third, Richard Pasch - believed that Mr. Proenza had damaged public confidence in the Center and should be removed. Mr. Franklin was quoted as saying "... the hurricane specialists, by and large, do not agree with much of what he has done;" the article also stated that "shouting matches" had occurred between staffers supporting and opposing Mr. Proenza. On July 5, an e-mail was distributed to the Center staff inviting them to a meeting "to openly discuss recent events." At that meeting, attendees were invited to go to a second room in a campus building owned by Florida International University to view and sign the statement that was released to the media. It is also at this point that concerns are raised about the possibility that

funds supporting aircraft flights would be reprogrammed to build a replacement QuikSCAT. As far as staff can determine, that proposal had never been made by any Member and would be unlikely given the vast difference in the financial scope of the two programs.

Ms. Glackin told staff that a call was received on July 6 indicating that the assessment team felt Mr. Proenza's actions were inhibiting the ability of the team to conduct their review. Admiral Lautenbacher discussed the situation with the team. On July 7, Admiral Lautenbacher sent a memorandum to the Center staff indicating Mr. Proenza was placed on leave and named Mr. Rappaport as acting director. Mr. Proenza received the letter informing him he was on leave until August 9 as he arrived at Miami airport July 9. He was also told that he should not go to the Center offices without permission from Mr. Uccellini and that he should not contact members of the Center staff.

A document request was sent to NOAA July 12 from Chairman Gordon, Chairman Lampson, and Chairman Miller of this Committee, and Chairman Dingell and Chairman Stupak of the Energy and Commerce Committee, asking for records covering Ms. Glackin's June 14 memorandum and communications between various NOAA officials concerning Mr. Proenza.

At this point, a number of important questions remain:

- Why was Proenza chosen to be Director of the highest profiled Center at NOAA?
- Beyond the items listed in the Glackin memorandum--which NOAA stresses was not a reprimand document and was not placed in Mr. Proenza's personnel file--are there any other actions that better justify the action to place Proenza on leave?
- Why was there such a depth of dissatisfaction over Proenza's focus on a particular satellite?
- What is needed to properly equip the Tropical Prediction Center, and are those resources available at this time?
- Was the Tropical Prediction Center incapable of carrying out its core task of identifying, tracking and predicting hurricanes before the evaluation team was dispatched by Admiral Lautenbacher?