



**Testimony of Robie Robinson
on behalf of
Emergency Managers' Association of Texas**

**Before the Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment
and the
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
Committee on Science and Technology
US House of Representatives
“Tracking the Storm at the National Hurricane Center”**

July 19, 2007

Chairman Lampson, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Inglis, and Ranking Member Sensenbrenner and subcommittee members, thank you for inviting me to speak to you this morning. My name is Robie Robinson. I am the Director of Security and Emergency Management for Dallas County, Texas, and I am here to speak on behalf of the Emergency Managers' Association of Texas.

As you know, every state across the nation is at risk to some form of disaster. Texas is no exception. Our state is vulnerable to multiple forms of disaster situations – whether they are triggered by an act of nature, an accident, or man-made. We know from historical data that disaster situations occur in the state nearly every day, and weather threats cause the majority of deaths. From 1989 – 2000, floods and flash floods caused 35% of the weather-related deaths in Texas. These are followed by tornados, lightning, winter storms, extreme heat, severe thunderstorms, and finally by hurricane/tropical storms. As I was preparing this testimony, Texas had 61 counties dealing with declared disasters. We also know that a proactive and robust emergency management program can reduce risk, property loss, and death. A critical component of a local emergency management program is timely and accurate weather data that decision makers understand.

Bill Proenza has always been an active supporter of local emergency managers. During his tenure as the southern regional director, Bill ensured that the local government emergency managers had ready access to weather information. He ensured his Warning Coordinating Meteorologists took the time to understand our weather information needs and to explain the impacts and probabilities of weather events on our local areas. He ensured the Warning Coordinating Meteorologists were available during weather events to answer our questions, provide forecasts, and discuss the various weather products with us. He also ensured the Warning Coordinating Meteorologists worked closely with the storm spotters and volunteer weather monitors to improve the forecast models that applied to our most common hazard, flooding.

The Warning Coordinating Meteorologists and National Weather Service forecasters provide valuable training for local emergency managers and weather spotters. Bill supported and encouraged his staff to conduct training classes, teach local emergency managers one-on-one, and give presentations at local events and professional conferences.

National Weather Service support for local emergency managers was evident in my first emergency management position in rural Fisher County, Texas. I had only been the volunteer EMC for 10 days when a tornado struck in the middle of the largest town in the county. It wasn't a large tornado, but it wasn't a large town either. The National Weather Service assistance began with tornado warnings, but it did not end there. They stayed in touch as we had crews searching through debris and cleaning up streets over the next several days. The warnings given by the National Weather Service and the follow up concern that they displayed were incredible. That experience changed the relationship from Service and County, to Robie Robinson and Buddy McIntyre, Warning Coordination Meteorologist for the San Angelo office of the National Weather Service. I went on to learn more about thunderstorms and weather from Buddy and he hosted the first disaster exercise that I attended as an emergency manager. If I had never moved, I would have put it all off to small town hospitality, but I am now in the ninth largest county in the nation and the relationship that I have with Bill and Gary in the Fort Worth office is the same. They interact with the emergency managers in our area on a regular basis. That is how they are able to keep an eye on our needs and modify their efforts to help

us. It is clear to me that the commitment of the National Weather Service personnel with whom I have worked is a reflection of the leadership they had at the regional level.

Bill's support of local emergency managers also applied to the River Forecasting Centers. The Fort Worth River Forecast Center worked closely with local emergency managers as well as the US Army Corps of Engineers and Texas River Authorities before, during, and after heavy rainfall and flooding events. This coordination has been critical in our abilities to protect critical infrastructures, government facilities, and the public from flooding events.

The new weather products now available are very useful in our planning efforts. We have various text products, river data, hydrographs, various precipitation images, reports and forecasts. We now have better maps, charts, and tables; weather forecasts, hydrometeorological data and discussion, climate data, and historical data. Local emergency managers get the weather information we need in the format that best meets our needs thanks largely to the programs and the leadership of Bill Proenza.

The increased variety of weather products, discussions, and graphs, coupled with probability estimates improved decision making in our emergency operations centers before and during extreme weather events. We now have a wealth of weather data available in our emergency operations centers that did not exist ten years ago. That data, and our understanding of it, increases the time available for the local emergency manager and the elected officials to consider alternative courses of action and to select the most appropriate one for the jurisdiction. Bill worked with local emergency managers to ensure we had the data we needed.

There are those who say that technology has changed our world so that the weather is different or that our dependence on weather has lessened over the years. I would say that weather is not any different today than what it was back when Isaac Cline was watching the clouds in Galveston, Texas before the 1900 hurricane that is still the deadliest disaster to have struck in the United States. There are, however, differences in us and how we live. Our vulnerability is even greater than ever before. We have more citizens, buildings and vehicles at risk, and more densely populated cities with people who rely, not on their own eyes and wives' tales, but

instead on reliable scientific forecasts to safeguard their businesses and their families. Thanks to Bill's leadership, we have a National Weather Service Office with a staff of professionals who work to keep us informed and to answer our questions any time, day or night.

We have all learned to listen to forecasts and we have all heard when there were watches and warnings in our area. Admittedly, I am among the ranks of professional emergency managers who are professional paranoids. It is my job to watch the weather and plan for disasters but everyone wonders whether it will rain during the game or if today is a good day to go to the beach or to the lake. We rely on the National Weather Service for that information.

The National Weather Service distributes weather data based on our needs. Local emergency managers used to get weather warnings, watches, and information only by NOAA Weather Radio, phone or fax. Now we get them from the Internet, by e-mail, and by pagers. The Warning Coordinating Meteorologists and other National Weather Service Personnel listened to the local emergency managers needs for weather-related information and they met them. Bill Proenza actively pushed for the Warning Coordinating Meteorologist program and for the National Weather Service support of local emergency managers. The improvements we experienced over the last ten years would not have occurred without his leadership in the southern region.

I interact with people all over the state on a regular basis. People from cities, counties, private industry, healthcare, transportation, state employees, and federal personnel. Across the board, they have nothing but positive comments when asked about the National Weather Service. Under Mr. Proenza's leadership, the southern region built this reputation and those in place today are working diligently to maintain it. However, don't make the mistake of thinking that they are content to stop there. They are constantly leaning forward in the saddle looking for new, innovative ways to help us do our jobs better for the people of the Lone Star State. I have attended numerous meetings where I have spoken with National Weather Service representatives who were eager to hear comments from emergency managers about how we used their products and what we would like to see in the future.

The National Weather Service has also built valuable partnerships. Just a couple of years ago, they opened a new office jointly with Galveston County Emergency Management. This is an innovative, forward thinking partnership. We all want to claim that we can cooperate with others in our respective fields but how many of us actually go so far as to share our offices daily. Emergency managers and the National Weather Service have a strong tradition of working together but that isn't enough. It is more important to look toward the future and to ensure that we are prepared. That is where the southern region was incredibly effective during Mr. Proenza's tenure. When I was fighting wildfires across the state for the Texas Forest Service in 2000, I knew I could and frequently did call the National Weather Service for spot weather forecasts. This required that meteorologists stop what they were doing and give me specific information for the very coordinates where property and lives were hanging in the balance. I needed that information to keep firefighters safe and to protect the homes and ranches of many of our citizens. These efforts weren't required; they were done because the service and the people behind it knew they needed to be done. I was safer and better able to do my job with the knowledge that they shared.

In the end, the National Weather Service is not a federal agency with people who sit in Washington to hand down products, guidelines, and grant funds. It is an agency of people who provide essential services to the emergency management community. Jack Colley, the Texas State Emergency Management Director could not be here today but he asked me to say, "We could not operate in Texas without the National Weather Service. They are a key partner in our state. Bill Proenza is an innovator and an advocate for serving the needs of the locals so that we can protect the people who rely on us."

My county is currently building a new Emergency Operations Center with County funds, not grant funds, to help keep our citizens safe. I hope that the National Weather Service will continue to look toward the future and bring new tools and products to the table. I hope that they continue the personal contact with professional emergency managers surrounding their regional offices. I hope their funding will be maintained at a level such that we won't ever question their value or their ability to serve the emergency management community and protect our people. I hope that I see can see and rely on the same enthusiasm and commitment from

the National Weather Service during the last half of my career that I saw and relied on in the first half. They share in our common goal and our common role as we work hand-in-hand to protect people.

In closing, I hope that the NWS will continue the partnerships, energy, knowledge and innovation that Bill Proenza fostered. I hope that the information sharing will continue to us at the local level as we are the conduits from which the warnings and watches are communicated to the Moms and Dads and sisters and brothers whose very lives depend on that information.

Members of the Subcommittees, forecasting the weather requires courage because human beings can not control what is going to happen. I hope that the leadership of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Weather Service do not move into this new century by squelching the courage of their people to speak out.