



NWSEO General Counsel tells Senate Commerce Committee that NWS employees are primary source of innovation; Senator Rubio calls NWS workforce “inefficient” and demands further cuts.

(December 12, 2013) NWSEO General Counsel and Legislative Director Richard Hirn testified today before the Senate Commerce Committee that the NWS “is placing the American people at risk and cutting off the source of future innovation” by refusing to fill vacant positions and eliminating virtually all training. Hirn noted that “the operational Weather Service employees have been the primary source of most of the innovation undertaken by the NWS in recent years” and that “no new satellite, supercomputer, forecast model or private sector partner will reduce the need for a highly trained and fully staffed workforce.”

The hearing, “Forecasting Success: Achieving U.S. Weather Readiness for the Long Term” was held by the Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and the Coast Guard, and was chaired by Senators Mark Begich (D-AK) and Brian Schatz (D-HI). Additional witnesses were NWS Director Dr. Louis Uccellini; Thomas Young, Chair of the Independent Review Team examining NOAA/NASA weather satellite operations; private sector partners in weather forecasting Dr. William Gail, President-elect, American Meteorological Society and Chief Technology Officer of Global Weather Corporation; Accuweather Inc. CEO Barry Myers; and Dr. Lee Ohanian, Professor of Economics, UCLA, Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

Senator Schatz praised NWS’s use of social media. In his testimony, Hirn explained the NWS’s use of social media, including Facebook, Twitter and NWSchat, was pioneered by employees in the field against resistance from headquarters. He also testified that the six pilot projects at six offices to test new service delivery models was not a management initiative but was first proposed to the Deputy Under Secretary by NWSEO in 2010. “The Weather Service will require more, not fewer, forecasters to provide these enhanced services nationwide,” Hirn explained. “But unfortunately, even before sequestration, the NWS has been shedding staff. Since 2008, the NWS has eliminated hundreds of positions and over eight percent of its workforce . . . Service assessments conducted following eight major storms that occurred since 2008, including Hurricane Sandy, found that agency performance was compromised due to inadequate staffing.”

Dr. Uccellini praised the work of NWS employees, but when asked what resources the agency needed, he passed on the opportunity to ask for resources to fill the hundreds of operational vacancies. He also referred to the development of a new “integrated office structure” but failed to explain what the agency has in mind.

Hirn’s testimony was followed by Dr. Ohanian, a labor economist, who also focused on the importance of a cooperative relationship between the NWS and NWSEO. Dr. Ohanian provided information on the influence of unions and specifically cited that NWSEO’s successes in saving NWS employees’ jobs and suggested that the union’s efforts may be responsible for increasing compensation of NWS forecasters above the private sector. In his written testimony, Dr. Ohanian wrote:

I list below the NWSEO's main five recent achievements, all of which either involve raising compensation or expanding personnel:

1. Saving the CWSUs from consolidation – a culmination of a five year lobbying effort by NWSEO to preserve both aviation safety and NWS employee jobs.
2. Securing back pay for overtime for nearly 200 NWS employees. Securing FLSA (fair labor standards act) Non-Exempt status of an additional 165 NWS employees. The NWS has agreed to pay two years' lost overtime wages and liquidated damages for those employees, as well.
3. Winning an appeal to bargain to increase staffing at Anchorage WFO (national weather forecast service office) by 10 positions - this directs the National Weather Service to bargain with NWSEO over a proposal that would increase staffing at the Anchorage WFO by ten positions.
4. Securing special projects designed to increase aviation safety, which include increased NWS personnel at the CWSU and WFOs in New York City, Atlanta, and Chicago.
5. NWSEO secured an agreement that upgrades to a GS -8 every Administrative Support Assistant at field offices around the country. The GS -8 upgrade includes approximately one million dollars in extra pay and benefits to the lowest paid NWS employees each and every year from now on.

The NWSEO also has a top 20 historical achievement list that also includes items that raise the possibility of expanding staffing and raising compensation above market. These include:

1. Defeated the agency's plans to reduce staffing and consolidate Forecast Offices (CONOPS).
2. Defeated the agency's plan to eliminate nearly 400 HMTs and instead negotiated for the creation of new promotional opportunities for HMTs (the GS-12 OPL position) and true time and one-half overtime for HMTs.
5. Won an arbitration case which requires the agency to maintain at least two employees on duty on every forecast shift.
9. Negotiated agreements that raised target grades of interns from GS-9 to GS-11 and that entitles interns to the first opportunity to apply for forecaster vacancies before outside candidates.
10. Won an arbitration case which requires the agency to make temporary promotions when forecasters over vacant positions for 20 days or more.

The only sour note in the hearing was when Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) attacked NWSEO by name and called on the NWS to reduce staff further. Senator Rubio said that the NWS workforce was "inefficient" and erroneously claimed that the NWS workforce has grown in recent years. He complained that salaries make up 61% of the NWS budget and said, "the demands of the workforce make work against our efforts to streamline and find efficiencies."

An archived webcast of the hearing and written testimony of the witnesses can be found at:

http://www.commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=Hearings&ContentRecord_id=bb7eeb10-3855-4539-bc2e-169b3ed4ea15&ContentType_id=14f995b9-dfa5-407a-9d35-56cc7152a7ed&Group_id=b06c39af-e033-4cba-9221-de668ca1978a

No one cares more for National Weather Service employees than
National Weather Service employees.

No one works harder for National Weather Service employees than
National Weather Service employees.

We are NWSEO.