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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <http://commerce.senate.gov>

September 27, 2017

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Ross:

The dedicated employees of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) have been working overtime to track the likely path and intensity of the dangerous hurricanes of the 2017 Atlantic season. Undoubtedly, their work saves lives and property. But the employees simply must have the tools to carry out the essential weather forecast mission of the agency. And I am gravely concerned that they do not.

NOAA's aging Gulfstream hurricane hunter is in increasing need of repairs, has been grounded during hurricane season in the past, and is reaching the end of its serviceable life. The data from this aircraft improves hurricane track forecasts by up to 15 percent and, as we've seen all too recently, better data on where these storms are headed is essential.

In a Commerce Committee hearing on hurricanes, I asked the previous Director of the National Hurricane Center what would happen if NOAA's only Gulfstream hurricane hunter jet were grounded. He acknowledged that it was a single point of failure—and that NOAA doesn't have backup capability to provide the data the jet gathers.

Sure enough, my fears were recognized in 2016 when the Gulfstream was grounded for emergency repair during Hurricane Hermine.

I worked with colleagues in the Senate and the House to include legislation to require a backup for the hurricane hunters in the Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act, signed by the president in April of this year.

As you can imagine, I was disheartened and concerned to note that NOAA has not yet secured the backup as required by law. The Gulfstream flew over 31.8 hours for Hurricane Harvey missions and over 74 hours for Hurricane Irma missions. But now those concerns have become an emergency. There have already been multiple emergency repairs and groundings this hurricane season. Just yesterday the main cabin door on the Gulfstream started leaking at 45,000 feet and the aircraft had to make an emergency landing for the second time in eight days. Now the Gulfstream is scheduled to be down for three days or more in the middle of hurricane season.

It is simply unacceptable that no major steps have been taken to acquire reliable backup. NOAA predicted an above-average Atlantic hurricane season this year and had more than fair warning in 2016 when the Gulfstream was grounded.

In questions I submitted to the record during your confirmation hearing, I alerted you to the need to replace this aging aircraft. In response, you said that you would learn more about the status of the hurricane hunters and would "weigh carefully the options for their expeditious replacement if needed." I assure you, replacement is needed, and it is needed now. Lives and property depend on reliable observations from the NOAA jet.

By way of this letter, I am requesting all maintenance records for NOAA's Gulfstream since January 2012. Please provide these in electronic format no later than Friday, October 6, 2017. Thank you in advance for your attention to this life and safety matter.

Sincerely,



BILL NELSON
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable John Thune, Chairman