

TED CRUZ, TEXAS, CHAIRMAN

JOHN THUNE, SOUTH DAKOTA	MARIA CANTWELL, WASHINGTON
ROGER F. WICKER, MISSISSIPPI	AMY KLOBUCHAR, MINNESOTA
DEB FISCHER, NEBRASKA	BRIAN SCHATZ, HAWAII
JERRY MORAN, KANSAS	EDWARD J. MARKEY, MASSACHUSETTS
DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA	GARY C. PETERS, MICHIGAN
MARSHA BLACKBURN, TENNESSEE	TAMMY BALDWIN, WISCONSIN
TODD YOUNG, INDIANA	TAMMY DUCKWORTH, ILLINOIS
TED BUDT, NORTH CAROLINA	JACKY ROSEN, NEVADA
ERIC SCHMITT, MISSOURI	BEN RAY LUJAN, NEW MEXICO
JOHN CURTIS, UTAH	JOHN W. HICKENLOOPER, COLORADO
BERNIE MORENO, OHIO	JOHN FETTERMAN, PENNSYLVANIA
TIM SHEEHY, MONTANA	ANDY KIM, NEW JERSEY
SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO, WEST VIRGINIA	LISA BLUNT RITCHIE, DELAWARE
CYNTHIA M. LUMMIS, WYOMING	

BRAD GRANTZ, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
LILA HARPER HELMS, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125
WEBSITE: <https://commerce.senate.gov>

May 29, 2025

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

Mr. Charles Ezell
Acting Director
Office of Personnel Management
1900 E St NW
Washington, DC 20415

Dear Secretary Lutnick and Mr. Ezell,

The Administration's dismantling of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ("NOAA") workforce has crippled the National Weather Service ("NWS"). The firing of probationary employees, early retirements, and other Administration efforts have led to more than 560 departures¹ from NWS, a 33% reduction from historic levels, leaving many locations critically understaffed and the agency scrambling to fill the gaps.

NOAA initiated an agency-wide effort on May 13, 2025, to relocate existing personnel to temporarily fill 155 positions in "critically understaffed" locations across NWS.² This proposed solution may serve as a stopgap, but it is not a viable long-term strategy.

On February 19, 2025, I wrote to Secretary Lutnick to urge protection of NOAA's workforce and exempt the NWS and other safety related jobs from the hiring freeze due to the crucial role they play in protecting lives, property, and our national economy. Now that we have seen the fallout from these ill-advised cuts, I once again demand the Administration immediately provide NOAA with a public safety exemption to the federal hiring freeze so the agency can take immediate

¹ Freedman, Andrew. "National Weather Service Seeks to Fill 155 'critical' Vacancies Ahead of Hurricane Season." CNN, May 14, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/14/weather/nws-critical-vacancies>.

² NOAA scrambles to fill forecasting jobs as hurricane season looms - the Washington Post. Accessed May 21, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2025/05/14/national-weather-service-vacancies-hurricane-season/>.

steps to fill critical positions and prevent a further breakdown in life-saving forecasts and warnings.

For at least half a century, NWS has provided weather forecasting 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but with the Administration's cuts, at least eight weather forecasting offices no longer have enough meteorologists to cover overnight shifts.³ The Pendleton, Oregon office that covers central Washington will stop staffing overnight shifts, and we'll lose the consistent local knowledge about weather hazards that impacts the accuracy of forecasts and warnings needed to inform transportation agencies, farmers, schools, firefighters, emergency responders, and other public officials that rely on accurate and timely forecasts and warnings. Additionally, 30 of the 122 weather forecast offices are currently lacking their highest-ranking official, known as the meteorologist-in-charge, including at offices that cover major metropolitan areas such as New York City, Cleveland, Houston, and Tampa. The office in Jackson, Kentucky lost both overnight staffing and their meteorologist-in-charge and was left scrambling to find adequate staffing on May 16, 2025, as severe storms moved across the region,⁴ ultimately killing 18 people in Kentucky.⁵

The staffing shortages are also impacting NWS's ability to collect and disseminate the weather data that underpins NOAA's own forecasts and warnings as well as serves as the foundation for the entire U.S. weather enterprise. There are over 90 vacancies among the specialized staff who maintain and repair the NWS's Doppler radar and Automated Surface Observing Systems⁶ greatly increasing the chances of equipment outages. These systems are the cornerstone of NWS's severe weather warning operations and provide pilots and air traffic controllers with the data they need to safely manage air traffic and minimize delays. Additionally, at least 10 weather forecast offices have suspended or limited their weather balloon launches, which for decades have occurred twice daily to gather data on a steady cadence.⁷ Carrying instruments called radiosondes, the balloons rise to 115,000 feet and gather vital atmospheric data that cannot easily be replicated by satellites or other instruments. Without this information forecasts become less accurate and less reliable.

June 1 marks the start of hurricane season, and many parts of the country are already contending with wildfires and violent storms. Every living former Director of the NWS, from both Republican and Democratic administrations, wrote and released an open letter to the American

³ Where local forecast offices no longer monitor weather around the clock - The Washington Post. Accessed May 21, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2025/05/16/weather-service-offices-overnight-cuts-map/>.

⁴ After cuts, a Kentucky weather office scrambles for staffing as severe storms bear down - The New York Times. Accessed May 21, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/16/weather/nws-cuts-kentucky-tornado.html>.

⁵ Jenna Fisher, Emily Cochrane. "At Least 27 Dead after Tornadoes and Storms Tear across Central U.S." The New York Times, May 18, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/17/weather/storms-tornadoes-missouri-kentucky.html>.

⁶ Freedman, Andrew. "US Weather Forecasting Is More Crippled than Previously Thought as Hurricane Season Nears." CNN, May 2, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/02/weather/nws-forecasting-layoffs-trump>.

⁷ "With Fewer Weather Balloons Due to Government Staffing Cuts, Forecasts May Be Less Accurate." NBCNews.com, March 27, 2025. <https://www.nbcnews.com/science/science-news/weather-balloons-stop-trump-cuts-forecasts-less-accurate-rcna198055>.

people warning about the impact of staffing and program cuts.⁸ The Directors "stand united against the loss of staff and resources at NWS and are deeply concerned about NOAA as a whole...[Their] worst nightmare is that weather forecast offices will be so understaffed that there will be needless loss of life."

Granting a public safety exemption to the hiring freeze is essential to prevent further degradation of our nation's weather readiness. Please provide the Committee with a response by June 1, 2025, explaining how you will resume hiring at the NWS to ensure consistent weather forecasting coverage.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member

⁸ "Former National Weather Service Leaders Warn about 'Loss of Life' from NOAA Cuts." CBS News. Accessed May 21, 2025. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/former-national-weather-service-leaders-letter-noaa-cuts/>.