U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

National Weather Service Cuts Virtual Press Conference

June 4th, 2025

Opening Remarks

Sen. Cantwell: I want to thank Jeff Renner, and Alan Gerard, and Brian LaMarre for joining us today as part of this discussion about the vital role the National Weather Service plays. I'm going to introduce them a little more in a few minutes.

But obviously, we're here because we're very concerned about the Administration's slashing of a workforce that is essential for weather forecasting that affects both hurricane and wildfire seasons.

And today, we're here because it is the beginning of hurricane season. NOAA -- at least 1,867 employees, representing 16% of NOAA's workforce, have been lost through the firing of probationary employees, early retirement and the Administration's effort to reduce that federal workforce.

These staffing shortages are having a dangerous impact on the Weather Service, with more than 560 staff lost -- that's a 33% reduction from typical staffing levels, leaving many weather forecast offices across the nation critically understaffed.

We know in the Northwest, we care about fire season. And we have a new map that shows you, the red areas are the areas that we believe will be most dangerous in the fire season. Actually, we have two different maps. This is the June forecast, and Jeff will get this. This is the July forecast.

So, in the July forecast, you can see that the entire state of Washington is in the red, which means that our whole state will be in a high risk area for fire, and that is why we want to determine, and have the best information we can, about those weather conditions and how to fight those fires.

We know one thing very dramatically, that if you have very high wind events, the challenges that we are facing in a fire season are almost -- there's almost an inability to deal with them. So we want to know when those conditions are going to exist because lives are at stake. Lives are at stake at fighting the fire, and if you're going to have these kind of unbelievable wind events, we need to be better prepared.

So, we're not the only people that have dealt with fire. Hawaii, the cost of the impact that we saw there, North and South Carolina, Texas, Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, they're all facing above normal fire levels. And this week, we know that we're marking the beginning of hurricane season with NOAA predicting a more active Atlantic hurricane season with impacts on the East Coast and Gulf states, and many of which are still recovering from the previous hurricane season.

So, the meteorologists here today are [going] to talk about those staffing shortages, how the degrading weather report that you get every morning from the news and apps all depend on forecasting information, that forecasting information literally saves lives, and so we need the

National Weather Service to be appropriately staffed and funded, and appropriate people to give us the life-saving information that we need. The national weather service lifesaving forecast and warnings protect people, but they also protect property. And the development of these forecasts really take lots of scientists and lots of data.

NOAA scientists collect about 6.3 billion data observations from satellites, buoys, planes, ships, balloons and radar. And if you think about that, that's a very comprehensive effort. Again, the three people we're going to hear from have dedicated their lives to using that information and informing the public.

All that data analysis results in about 1.5 million in annual forecast[s] and 50,000 warnings, *50,000 warnings* to help a community prepare for hurricanes, heat waves, wildfires, tornadoes, blizzards and other extreme events.

I first got active in this when we had a horrific 100-year flood event out on our coast that lost lives, and previous administrators and Weather Service officials thought that we didn't need a Doppler for our coast. They didn't understand that without that data, Seattle couldn't really predict because of the blocking of our Olympic Range, that basically we were not giving people on the Pacific Coast in our state the accurate weather information. And several people died, huge loss of property, and that was when people said, “Oh, you need your own Doppler system.”

And that's what we're saying today: do not take the staff away. Do not take the people that are giving us the analysis of this data and information -- do not take them off their job because they are going to help all of us be a network and prepare for hurricane season and later fire season.

Last year, there were 27 weather disaster events that cost taxpayers at least $1 billion and that totaled a total of $183 billion and it resulted in 568 deaths. So we're trying to prevent those damages, and we're trying to prevent, obviously, the devastating impact to life by being prepared, by getting people where they need to be.

From day one the Trump Administration has been undermining NOAA and the National Weather Service. We have said to the Commerce Secretary that these cuts [to] services are undermining our ability to deliver accurate information to the public. And every former director of the National Weather Service, representing both Republican and Democrat administrations, wrote a letter saying, “Their worst nightmare is that weather forecast offices will be so understaffed that there will be needless loss of life.” That is coming from former National Weather Service Representatives.

And we have already seen these impacts from the Administration failing to heed these warning. For at least a half a century, the National Weather Service has provided forecasts for 24 hours a day, seven days a week until now. At least eight weather forecasting offices no longer have a meteorologist to cover overnight shifts. They are planning on eliminating the NOAA buoy program. You can't map a hurricane if you don't have the buoy information. And this includes places that these loss of office places, where we don't have the overnight forecasters, places in Central Washington, places in Oregon, and losing those overnight forecasters means that we're at risk.

Out-of-town skeleton forecast crews are now assigned to cover these offices, and I'm concerned that they won't be able to deliver the forecast and warnings that communities need, which are important to have. Things like what schools need to be evacuated, what roads might flood, what are the key issues the community needs to act on to give law enforcement and others the tools that they need to be helpful.

On top of that, 30 of the 122 weather forecast offices don't currently have a meteorologist in charge. They're the most experienced weather expert, and some of those vacancies are in major metropolitan areas such as New York, Cleveland, Houston, and hurricane-prone Tampa.

The Secretary [of Commerce's] assertion this morning that the National Hurricane Center is fully staffed is incorrect. The National Hurricane Center has at least five vacancies going into hurricane season. These [positions] provide marine forecast, weather warnings for all of the Atlantic Basin and the Eastern Pacific, and they track intensity and size of storms, and maintain critical software.

Despite what the Secretary said this morning, NOAA has been transparent that they can't keep up. They have said that they can't keep the lights on in a number of forecast offices. The Department of Commerce needs to be clear to the American people that the staffing shortages will impact our ability to compute that science [and] get those wildfire crews and emergency response where they need to go.

Every summer, NOAA deploys meteorologists to the fire lines to help track wind, rain, smoke and other critical information needed to fight fires. Just last year, I was on one of those lines in Central Washington and met with the meteorologist, and it's so critical in in those parts of our state that you have that meteorologist on the ground in that particular fire, because they have to advise all the firefighters and the response and what has to happen. They are the one advising.

And if you think you're going to substitute somebody that's going to be somewhere else, I don't know where, some other part of the state or some other state, and you think they're you're going to give them accurate weather information, it doesn't work that way. It just doesn't.

Just yesterday, King 5 reported that Matthew Dehr Washington state wildfire meteorologist said that he is scared because we may have lost many on the ground NOAA meteorologists that are needed for the fire line. That means we may not have enough information we need to effectively fight wildfires, and when we have wildfires and they build a fire line that saves the whole community, they need to know where they are supposed to go. We don't have unlimited resources when we are fighting fires, particularly when we have very strong wind, which, believe it or not, is the lifesaving thing that the meteorologist does. He calls the shots. And if the winds are too high, he says we're not going out.

And we had an incident in our state where we didn't have a local meteorologist, and people went out, and it was the wrong conditions and we lost lives. So we don't want to repeat this. We don't want to go through what we've already learned in our state.

We are short more than 90 staff whose job it is to keep the Doppler radar and automated [surface observing systems] operating across the nation. Weather data from the Doppler and airport

system is the backbone of the forecast information. It is what pilots and air traffic controllers use to manage air traffic and minimize flight delays. So, we need to have these programs funded.

We know that right now, that critical weather could be coming at us. They did come back and fill a few of the jobs, but NOAA is still critically understaffed. We need to have NOAA fully staffed at a time when the weather is going to cost us lives and billions of dollars if we don't call the right shots.

This week, the administration announced approval for the weather service to hire less than a quarter of the total staff that they lost in this administration. A quarter. A quarter of the staff are not going to do the job when, let's just say both hurricane and fire risks are increasing. We were we were barely getting by. So, their approach in response to this has been a flimsy band-aid over a very massive cut.

With hurricane and wildfire seasons bearing down, the Administration should act now to lift this hiring freeze and ensure that these communities, these pilots, these firefighters, emergency responders, and these meteorologists have the weather information they need to help us save lives.

And now I'd like to turn it over to our panelists. First, we'll start with Brian LaMarre, who [was] a meteorologist in charge in [the] Tampa Bay area, to speak to the upcoming hurricane season and the danger it proposes to the Southeast and beyond, and the importance of having a meteorologist in charge -- those are those 30 that we're missing right now and we need more -- and overall, what these staffing shortages represent. Brian, thank you for joining us.

LaMarre: All right. Thank you, Senator. Thank you for your support and for forming this important panel today. I've had over 30 years in the National Weather Service. My career started back in 1992 and that year, a lot of people in Florida remember Hurricane Andrew, right? That was a very powerful storm.

And more than half of my career I was a meteorologist in charge at the National Weather Service here in Tampa, Florida, and we cover pretty much all the west coast and southwest coast of Florida. It’s a very active state when it comes to hurricane season. And as you mentioned, hurricane season started this week. So, we're already a handful of days into the 2025 hurricane season.

But the National Weather Service and NOAA are dealing with their own storm right now in the form of short staffing and budget cuts, and it's having impacts on the number of staffing that are available to actually meet the 24/7 mission. Not every office across the country is short staffed, but there are, as you said, there are eight that are below a certain number of employees that work at that particular office, and that means that they can't work 24/7 operations. That's never before happened in my career.

But there are some offices that are having sufficient staffing, but again, whenever you look at an office that is short staffed, that means that a piece of that larger puzzle is taken away, right? And so that means that some outreach might not be able to occur, some training might not be able to occur, some briefings to officials might not be able to occur. But as a longtime employee in the

National Weather Service, we're very mission focused, very dedicated, and we do what is needed to be done to get the mission completed.

So again, a lot of gaps across the agency as we go into this hurricane season. And you mentioned the meteorologist in charge position because there's about 30 that are vacant right now, including my former position at the NWS office in Tampa. And that position, if you think of a chief meteorologist, you know that is the chief meteorologist or the office director at each of the 122 weather forecast offices across the country.

And that person leads the office. That person is the main point of contact when it comes to briefing elected officials, emergency management, directors, state governors, city mayors, parish officials. These are the individuals that are leading that office and also leading change. They are the individual that's going to be implementing any new change that is needed for hurricane season, blizzards, wildfires, inland flooding.

And I say inland flooding because I want to kind of wrap on that one, is because a lot of people, when they think of the hurricane season, they think of coastal counties. And as we saw last year with Hurricane Helene, that hit not far from where I'm sitting today in Tampa, Florida, that storm tracked much farther inland, as many do, and did significant devastating impacts -- people are still recovering, as we speak today in parts of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee, and that was significant inland flooding. So again, we think of the hurricane season. It's not only about the coastline.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you so much. We're now going to turn to Alan Gerard, a 35-year meteorologist with the National Weather Service and with the National Severe Storms Laboratory in Norman, Oklahoma, to talk about severe storms and why the Office of Atmospheric Research is a critical aspect to weather forecasting. Thank you so much, Alan.

Gerard: Thank you for having me, Senator, and I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with this distinguished panel because, as you said, I started with the National Weather Service in 1990. As with Brian, I was a meteorologist in charge for a number of years, while he was in Tampa, I was in Jackson, Mississippi until 2015, and I worked a number of serious weather events during my time, including Hurricane Katrina, the super outbreak of 2011 -- the super tornado outbreak. And those events really reinforced to me, as you said, Senator, that all of this is a matter of life and death, and it's very important to me that NOAA and the Weather Service be able to meet its mission.

And as Brian alluded to, for the first time in 35 years, I have real concerns due to the staffing situation. And the very fact that some offices aren't able to operate 24/7. And that the Administration has authorized these hires during a hiring freeze, tells you that there's recognition that there's serious shortages.

But I want to finish by taking a few minutes to talk about the last role I had at NOAA, which was as a branch director at the National Severe Storms Laboratory, which is part of the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research. And I moved into that position because I'd had an opportunity over the years to work with OAR labs on doing research and developing new

products and services to help Weather Service meteorologists, and meteorologists in general, to be able to provide better information.

And essentially the current president's budget would eliminate the entire line office of OAR and all of that research infrastructure that has been developed over the decades: the National Severe Storms Lab, the Hurricane Research Division in Miami, the Global Systems Lab in Boulder, which does a lot of fire weather and wildfire research. All of those labs and their associated cooperative institutes that are at the universities, in those communities, would all be eliminated under the current budget. And that just would really be disastrous from the perspective of being able to do things like advance tornado warnings with the Warn-on-Forecast System that my laboratory was developing, to develop new tools for the incident meteorologists, which is in progress right now.

And one of the things that I had an opportunity to be very active with when I was at the Severe Storms Lab before I retired, was NOAA's Hazardous Weather Test Bed, which is where we would bring in broadcast meteorologists like Jeff and emergency managers and the people that actually use these new tools, and work together to co-develop research and tools that would help improve all of the services that keep people safe. And all of that is in tremendous danger right now, given the proposal to eliminate OAR.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. Thank you for that. It's really the research. When we worked on the Doppler thing out on the coast of Washington, I said, "Well, we're good now, right? We have this Doppler." And there were a bunch of people there, and they said, "No, no, Senator, we're not good yet. We need everything."

I said, "Well, what do you mean?" They said, "Well, every particle in the storm is an algorithm, and you could run supercomputing time, and it would give you a better prediction of that supercomputing analysis and tell you what the real impacts of the storm are."

I said, "Well, why aren't we doing that?" And again, they referred to the NOAA budget, which I do think is one of the reasons you hear a lot about the European forecast model now, which is very frustrating. "Here's what we think." And then, "But the European model says x."

That is because the Europeans spend more time on the supercomputing analysis of the weather information. So I can't think of anything that I would rather spend more supercomputing time on as it relates to saving American lives than making sure that we have accurate weather forecasting information.

So, there is more to do on research. There is, and it could be very helpful, and we should invest in it. It would save the American people lives, and it would save money.

Jeff Renner, so proud of you, Jeff for your years of Northwest coverage. You obviously were at King 5 in Seattle. So the guy who had to take all this data that that Brian and Alan made giving and reporting on [it], and turn it into real analysis for the people of our state, and he's going to talk about the critical role that forecasters play in helping us predict these extreme weather events, and the importance that Northwest NWS data forecasting to the entire industry, and what that means. So Jeff, welcome and thank you.

Renner: Thank you very much, Senator, and thank you also for your championing of the coastal radar. That provided protection and saved lives and properties, really, from the day it was turned on.

As I'm essentially hitting clean up, I'd like to recognize both Brian and Alan for their years of service. And I find it frankly shameful that we even have to have this sort of discussion. More people such as you and I now utilize weather apps, such as I have on my telephone, yet there is a lack of fundamental appreciation that most of those forecasts, if not all of them, stem from National Weather Service forecasts.

There are also the important sources of data information operated and maintained, pardon me by the National Weather Service and also by NOAA. Examples would include some of those you've already heard, such as, pardon me I've got a throat problem here, include surface and high altitude weather observations over both land and sea.

Sen. Cantwell: I'll give you a break for a second, yeah. Take a sip of Northwest coffee or water.

Renner: Some peppermint tea. From my regional perspective, as a longtime broadcast meteorologist here in the Pacific Northwest, some 38-39 years, I would mention four key elements that are dependent upon the National Weather Service that impact public safety. Atmospheric rivers -- could I have a break for a minute please?

Sen. Cantwell: Before you resume, I will just tell you that I think we're making the terminology atmospheric rivers popular here in DC. I think people didn't really understand it, and I think they thought, “Oh, this is just some new thing, and you're trying to get –.” But no, we're like, “No, no, no.”

Atmospheric rivers are really affecting us in the Northwest, and because of our terrain and not deeply-rooted trees, and the amount of damage that can happen from a very concentrated -- again, that's what the data showed us, right? -- That the atmospheric river was like a severe amount of moisture at a critical point. I think even when we had the Oso blowout, I think somebody said we had four inches that day.

Renner: That was very true, and let me try to jump back in, Senator.

Sen. Cantwell: Please.

Renner: We should explain that atmospheric rivers essentially draw up huge volumes of water from the tropics to the Pacific Northwest and to California as well, and that the end result is landslides, erosion, flooding, and the loss of very important and very critical infrastructure, such as bridges and roads, that can prevent interstate and intrastate commerce for very long periods.

I think another one, based on my experience, is that of wind storms. We do experience hurricane-force winds here in the Pacific Northwest. I think we could look back to the bomb cyclone just last November. I think it was November 18th and 19th. And those produced, not only hurricane-force winds, took several lives, and also eliminated power to some 600,000 customers. It wasn't just for a matter of a couple of days. It was a matter of a week, even more than a week, I know that was my personal experience.

Another element would be fires, and you mentioned that, Senator. We are entering into fire weather season, and as more developments move into what we call the urban wildland fire interface, we're seeing that that's a key factor. Fire seasons, fire weather seasons, are lengthening, and the meteorologists that respond to that have very specific training and very specific experience that can't be easily duplicated, particularly from those outside the area.

Not only do they have the business of alerting local communities to the potential for danger, but also providing guidance for the response crews, the very courageous men and women who respond to these, who seek to both suppress and also eliminate or extinguish those fires.

The last one is based on my experience, and it might be not totally apparent, but that is within broadcasting. The weather segment of a television news broadcast is probably the first or second most watched element of a newscast. As TV and radio ownership groups begin to expand, often beyond the local areas, we're seeing a move towards some stations that are seeking to outsource the production and even the presentation of those weather elements.

That means a loss of local knowledge, and as Brian and Alan have both stated so very well, that's critical in doing a good job of giving information, timely information, to local viewers and consumers of weather information. That makes the presence, I believe, of a fully staffed National Weather Service forecast office in any location, absolutely critical -- not just during daylight hours, but throughout a 24 hour cycle.

As I think we'd say on television. That's a wrap for my particular remarks, but I'm happy to answer any questions that might exist.