114th Congress
1st Session

S.

To establish regional weather forecast offices, and for other purposes.

____________________

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. THUNE introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred
to the Committee on __________________

____________________

A BILL

To establish regional weather forecast offices, and for other purposes.

1  Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-
2  tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
3  SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.
4  This Act may be cited as the “National Weather
5  Service Improvement Act”.
6  SEC. 2. NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE.
7  (a) ORGANIZATION.—The Administrator of the Na-
8  tional Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, through
9  the National Weather Service, shall develop a plan for es-
10  tablishing 6 regional weather forecast offices.

June 15, 2015 (9:55 a.m.)
(b) PLAN CONTENTS.—The plan under subsection (a) shall—

(1) whenever possible, prioritize locating a regional weather forecast office together with—

(A) an institution of higher education (as defined in section 101 of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1001)) with an active meteorology department; or

(B) a State or Federal department or agency;

(2) incorporate risk communication and decision support experts in the staffing model;

(3) ensure that local forecast quality will not be degraded;

(4) to the extent practicable, incorporate the best available science when determining schedules for employees on shift work in order to minimizes stress on those employees, while providing sufficient flexibility to temporarily increase staffing during severe weather events;

(5) provide sufficient training to minimize employee displacement as a consequence of the plan; and
(6) ensure that each regional weather forecast office has on staff the expertise necessary to forecast the severe weather events typical for the region.

(c) **NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL PLAN REVIEW.**—The Secretary of Commerce shall contract with the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences—

(1) to conduct a review of the scientific and technical soundness of the plan developed under subsection (a), including—

(A) an evaluation of the proposed staffing model;

(B) an assessment of the statistical and analytical measures that should be made for a service area to form an adequate basis for determining that there will be no degradation of service; and

(C) such recommendations as the National Research Council considers necessary for public safety purposes; and

(2) to submit the review under paragraph (1) to the Secretary not later than 1 year after the date of enactment of this Act.

(d) **PLAN IMPLEMENTATION.**—Not later than 1 year after the date of submission of the review under subsection
(c)(2), the Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, through the National Weather Service, shall implement the plan under subsection (a), taking into consideration the recommendations of the National Research Council under subsection (c)(1)(C).

(e) **REGIONAL WEATHER FORECAST OFFICES.**—

(1) **ESTABLISHMENT.**—

(A) **FIRST REGIONAL WEATHER FORECAST OFFICE.**—Not later than 3 years after the date of enactment of this Act, the first regional weather forecast office shall be established.

(B) **REMAINING REGIONAL WEATHER FORECAST OFFICES.**—Except as provided in subparagraph (A), each regional weather forecast office shall be established not later than 5 years after the date of enactment of this Act.

(2) **FORECAST CENTRALIZATION.**—Not later than 6 months after the date that each regional weather forecast office is established under paragraph (1), the Secretary of Commerce shall transfer the weather forecast functions, along with necessary staff, from each applicable weather forecast office to adequately staff the regional weather forecast office.

(f) **WARNING COORDINATION METEOROLOGISTS.**—
(1) IN GENERAL.—The National Weather Service shall hire or retain at least 1 warning coordination meteorologist at each weather forecast office.

(2) RESPONSIBILITIES.—A warning coordination meteorologist shall—

(A) be responsible for providing service to the geographic area of responsibility that was previously covered by a weather forecast office before the date of enactment of this Act;

(B) interface with users of National Weather Service products and services, such as the public, media outlets, users in the aviation, marine, and agricultural communities, and forestry, land, and water management interests, to evaluate the adequacy and usefulness of the products and services;

(C) collaborate with the appropriate regional weather forecast office and State, local, and tribal government agencies, as applicable, in developing, proposing, and implementing plans to develop, modify, or tailor National Weather Service products and services to improve their usefulness;

(D) ensure the maintenance and accuracy of severe weather call lists, appropriate office
severe weather policy or procedures, and other
severe weather or dissemination methodologies
or strategies;

(E) work closely with State, local, and tribal
emergency management agencies, and other
agencies related to disaster management, to en-
sure a planned, coordinated, and effective pre-
paredness effort; and

(F) whenever possible, be located together
with State or local emergency managers.

(3) ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES.—A warn-
ing coordination meteorologist may—

(A) work with relevant State government
agencies in developing plans for promoting
more effective use of National Weather Service
products and services throughout the State;

(B) identify priority community prepared-
ness objectives;

(C) develop plans to meet the objectives
identified in subparagraph (B); and

(D) conduct severe weather event pre-
paredness planning and citizen education efforts
with and through various State, local, and tribal
government agencies, and other disaster
management-related organizations.
(g) **Forecast Investments and Improvements.**—For at least 10 years after the date of enactment of this Act, any savings realized by the Department of Commerce by the centralization of weather forecast functions under subsection (e)(2) shall be used to improve the weather forecasts produced by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, including—

(1) by expanding super-computing capacity;

(2) by investing in research to improve weather forecasts;

(3) by improving the communication of weather forecasts to the public, particularly with respect to severe weather;

(4) by obtaining ground-based observations that would improve weather forecasts; and

(5) by improving radar coverage where necessary, with an emphasis on high density population centers with no radar coverage.

(h) **Definition of State.**—In this section, the term “State” means a State, a territory or possession of the United States, including a Commonwealth, or the District of Columbia.

**Sec. 3. Severe Weather Events Communication.**

(a) **Purpose.**—For purposes of preparing the recommendations under subsection (b)(1)(B) and imple-
menting the new system under subsection (c), the purpose
of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
system for issuing severe weather watches and warnings
shall be to reduce the loss of life due to severe weather
events.

(b) EVALUATION.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 2 years after
the date of enactment of this Act, the Administrator
of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Adminis-
tration shall—

(A) evaluate whether the National Oceanic
and Atmospheric Administration system for
issuing severe weather watches and warnings
meets the purpose under subsection (a); and

(B) submit to Congress a report on the
evaluation under subparagraph (A) and rec-
ommendations for how the system can be im-
proved and for any research necessary to ad-
dress the areas described in paragraph (2).

(2) CONTENTS.—The evaluation shall focus on
the following areas:

(A) Ways to more clearly communicate to
the public the risks presented by a severe
weather event.
(B) Ways to more broadly disseminate a severe weather watch or warning to the public.

(C) Ways that a severe weather watch or warning could help to reduce the loss of life due to an extreme weather event.

(3) CONSULTATION.—In developing the report, the Administrator shall—

(A) consult with relevant line offices within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, such as the National Ocean Service, the National Weather Service, and the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research;

(B) consult with the academic sector, including individuals in the field of social sciences, and other weather services;

(C) consult with media outlets that will be distributing the watches and warnings; and

(D) utilize the services of the National Academy of Sciences, as necessary.

(e) IMPLEMENTATION.—Not later than 4 years after the date of enactment of this Act, and if no additional action is taken by Congress regarding the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration severe weather watches and warnings system, the Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shall
implement, based on the evaluation and report under sub-
section (a), a new system for issuing severe weather
watches and warnings.

SEC. 4. REPORT ON CONTRACT POSITIONS AT THE NA-
TIONAL WEATHER SERVICE.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days after the
date of enactment of this Act, and annually thereafter for
5 fiscal years, the Administrator of the National Oceanic
and Atmospheric Administration shall submit to Congress
a report on the use of full-time equivalent contractors at
the National Weather Service for the most recently com-
pleted fiscal year.

(b) CONTENTS.—The report shall include—

(1) the total number of full-time equivalent em-
ployees at the National Weather Service;

(2) the total number of full-time equivalent con-
tractors at the National Weather Service;

(3) the 5 most common positions filled by full-
time equivalent contractors at the National Weather
Service;

(4) of the contract positions identified in para-
graph (3), the percentage of full-time equivalent con-
tractors in those positions that have held a prior po-

tion at the National Weather Service or the Na-
tional Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration;
(5) the average full-time equivalent salary for Federal employees at the National Weather Service;

(6) the average full-time equivalent salary for contractors at the National Weather Service; and

(7) a description of any actions taken by the Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to respond to the issues raised by the Department of Commerce Inspector General regarding the hiring of former National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration employees as contractors at the National Weather Service, such as the issues raised in the Investigative Report dated June 2015 (OIG-12-0447).