

Opening Statement
Rep. Paul Broun M.D. (R-GA), Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
Providing Aviation Weather Services to the Federal Aviation Administration
July 16, 2009

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to welcome the witnesses here today, and thank them for participating in this important hearing on the National Weather Service's (NWS) aviation weather forecasting proposal to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

As an instrument rated pilot myself, I understand that aviation weather forecasting is critically important. Aside from the obvious and primary concern of safety, the FAA estimates that weather related delays have a \$41 billion socio-economic impact on the U.S. economy. In order to ensure safety and mitigate these impacts, the NWS provides aviation weather information on a reimbursable basis to the FAA. Since these organizations are tasked with providing aviation weather information and ensuring air traffic safety, coordination is imperative.

Unfortunately, several reviews in recent years have found opportunities where coordination could be strengthened and services improved. In an attempt to address these issues and decrease operating costs, the FAA requested that the NWS restructure its center weather service units by consolidating offices, provide remote services, reduce personnel costs, and provide services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. On June 3, the NWS issued its current plan after having two previous proposals rejected by the FAA.

The proposal put forward in June by the NWS is far from perfect – I think even they will admit this. They clearly have work to do to establish performance baselines to ensure that service will not be degraded; they have challenges relating to infrastructure and technology; questions remain about how this will fit in with the FAA's NextGen initiative – if at all; and interagency collaboration remains a concern.

While it may seem that recent GAO reviews are critical of the NWS proposals, one has to realize that the Weather Service is simply responding to the FAA's direction. This coordination process between the two entities is unique and perplexing. The FAA is acting as a customer for NWS products and has provided NWS with its requirements. Because the FAA no longer considers private vendors an option for fulfilling these requirements, the NWS is in essence a sole-source contractor for FAA – a situation vendors usually relish as it puts them in an advantageous negotiating position. Instead, the NWS has put forth several proposals, only to have them rejected – most recently because of cost. I hope that the FAA realizes that new requirements are usually accompanied by new costs. Sure, technological advancements and improved processes can achieve cost savings, but when a customer demands more from its vendor, it should be willing to pay for it. Similarly, if a customer wants to pay less for a product, they shouldn't be surprised when they get less in return.

This may seem like trivial bureaucratic bickering, but it has real world implications to both commerce and airline passenger safety. I am happy to hear that coordination between the two entities is strengthening, and hope that the partnership can find a solution that is amenable to both parties, because ultimately the customers are our constituents, and the vendor is the government. As a pilot myself, I'll do everything I can to make sure this transaction goes smoothly.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back my time.

Thank you.

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