

House Committee on Science and Technology

Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Hearing on “*Continuing Independent Assessment of the National Polar-Orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System*”

June 17, 2009

Opening Statement of the Honorable Paul Broun, M.D. (R-GA) Ranking Member

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to welcome our witnesses here today and thank them for participating in this important hearing. This is the Committee’s sixth hearing on the National Polar-Orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS), spanning both Democratic and Republican control of the Committee. This is, however, the first time the Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee has held a hearing, but we have been actively involved for some time now.

NPOESS was originally planned to create synergies and cost-savings by combining the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) within the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Polar-Orbiting Environmental Satellite (POES) System at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Instead, the program has doubled in cost, shrunk from six to four satellites, degraded its sensor capabilities, and seen its schedule slip six years. If that wasn’t bad enough, Mr. Young points out in his testimony that “the current program has an extraordinarily low probability of success” – even after numerous rebaselinings and a significant Nunn-McCurdy recertification.

So how did we get here? After several years of cooperation, it has become clear that the partner agencies have differing priorities and levels of commitment. This is certainly expected given their unique missions, but this divergence has ultimately created an untenable partnership. NOAA is pressured by the scientific community to continue operation of research satellites that feed cutting-edge data into weather and climate models, while DoD is content to operate legacy hardware. NOAA doesn’t have any extra POES satellites to buffer its transition, while DoD still has two DMSP satellites on the ground. This is NOAA’s flagship mission, yet this barely amounts to a rounding error in the Pentagon’s budget.

Another reason is simply that space acquisition isn’t easy. This isn’t an excuse, but it is worth noting that we aren’t asking these agencies to build cardboard boxes. Sure, the government could do better with cost-estimating, procurement, and contract management, but in the end we are building one-of-a-kind innovative hardware and launching it 17,500 miles per hour into the vacuum of space.

Because of this complexity, we have sought to limit our costs by putting numerous sensors on fewer spacecraft and launch vehicles thereby restricting the opportunities for performance upgrades to generational timeframes. In doing so, we have created a

program that is essentially “too big to fail” – a phrase we have all heard lately to describe another fiasco. By placing all of our eggs in one basket, we have developed an architecture where it seems failure is not an option. Further compounding the problem are issues of requirements-creep from climate sensors, schedule pressure because of data continuity concerns, and cost caps from external factors like Nunn-McCurdy. It really isn't surprising that the program isn't run well when the managers can't fine-tune fundamental program management parameters like cost, schedule, and performance.

So where do we go from here? The General Accountability Office (GAO) and the Independent Review Team (IRT) have offered recommendations, and NOAA has proposed future management, budget, and data options. The IRT states that this program will ultimately require the White House to weigh in. We clearly have near-term decisions on the horizon, as well as long term plans to consider.

I look forward to exploring the implications of these options and proposed directions with the Chairman. NPOESS is a critical national asset that deserves not only this Committee's attention, but also that of all the partner agencies, the White House, and the Appropriators.

Every American is impacted by this program whether they know it or not. It is our responsibility to ensure that the farmers, fisherman, war-fighters, and everyday commuters continue to receive weather and climate information. But we must not forget to be good stewards of taxpayers' money and root out waste, inefficiency and duplication where we can.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back my time.

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