

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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August 3, 2007

The Honorable Conrad C. Lautenbacher
Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
and NOAA Administrator
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Administrator Lautenbacher:

Earlier this week, both of us called you to discuss our concerns about the treatment of X. William Proenza, director of the Tropical Prediction Center (TPC) by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Despite statements by you and others in the Subcommittees' hearing on July 19 that Mr. Proenza would be fairly treated, we have seen little evidence of that fairness in either the report of the assessment team released at the hearing or in the actions of NOAA officials before or after the initiation of that report.

Documents provided to the Subcommittees after the hearing show that Mr. Proenza's supervisors – before the assessment team had even been named – planned to re-assign him permanently to be training chief of the Office of Climate, Water and Weather Services, a drastic demotion. The primary reason given was his “misrepresentation” of the impact of the loss of the QUIKScat satellite.¹ Perhaps that determination is part of the reason why Mr. Proenza was given no opportunity to respond formally to the assessment team's report until after you had received an “Action Plan” based on the report's conclusions.

In addition, our review of documents provided by the Department, Committee staff interviews of TPC employees and the testimony provided under oath to the Subcommittees show that the assessment team lacked either the time or the inclination to obtain a full set of facts before drawing the conclusions it did. Some of the most damning criticisms of Mr. Proenza were based entirely on interviews with employees of the TPC to which Mr. Proenza was given no opportunity to respond before the report was

¹ Undated draft memorandum from Mary Glackin and Dr. Louis Uccellini to Xavier William Proenza; undated “Proenza and TPC Human Resources Strategy.”

released. Certain accusations appear to have little corroboration – claims of possible “retaliatory” actions and “reprisals” by Mr. Proenza against TPC employees. Criticisms by the assessment team of media interviews by Mr. Proenza, apparently failed to take into account Mr. Proenza’s assertion that NOAA’s own media staff arranged the interviews.

Other published reports suggest that Mr. Proenza was recruited for the position of TPC Director over the objection of many of the TPC staff, who wanted an internal candidate promoted to that position and that some of the TPC staff resented Mr. Proenza from the outset as a result. Mr. Proenza testified that he attempted to incorporate atmospheric research into forecasting operations, a change that the assessment report agreed needed to be made. However his testimony and other reports establish that some employees of the TPC resisted these needed changes in the Center’s operations that Mr. Proenza was attempting to effect. The assessment team made no attempt to evaluate these claims, and there is no evidence that your office intends to explore these possibilities either.

As we said in our conversations with you, Mr. Proenza took this job only because of your personal entreaty. Many of the recommendations for change in the operations of the Center made in the assessment team’s report were consistent with the initiatives that Mr. Proenza had already launched, such as the introduction of improved graphical tropical weather outlooks and greater linkages with the hurricane research community. And Mr. Proenza’s controversial statements about effects of the possible demise of QUIKScat have motivated NOAA to begin the first real planning for the replacement of this satellite after years of documented concerns from the TPC and other NOAA staff.²

Therefore, we are reiterating our requests to you that:

1. You review and consider Mr. Proenza’s response to the assessment report before completing any action plan.
2. That if you ultimately decide to remove Mr. Proenza permanently as the TPC Director, he be allowed the opportunity to return to the position as Director of the Southern Region of the National Weather Service. That position remains vacant, and Mr. Proenza served with great distinction in that position before agreeing to accept the position as Director of the TPC.

We have other questions concerning the future of the TPC Center, but we urge that you give the above matters your immediate attention. We also request that a copy of

² "Seven years after NOAA first began routinely utilizing satellite OSVW [Ocean Surface Vector Wind] data, the nation still has no plans for an operational OSVW data stream that addresses the present and future satellite OSVW requirements of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)." Chang, Paul and Zorana Jelenak, "NOAA Operational Satellite Ocean Surface Vector Winds Requirements Workshop Report," Tropical Prediction Center/National Hurricane Center, Miami, Florida, June 5-7, 2006, p. 7.

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the action plan prepared by Jack Kelly, Deputy Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, be provided to the Subcommittees by 5 p.m. on Monday, August 6, 2007.

If your staff has any questions or needs additional information, please contact Dr. Dan Pearson, Investigations and Oversight staff director at (202) 225-4494; Dr. Jean Fruci, Energy and Environment staff director, at (202) 226-0697, or James Paul, professional staff member at (202) 226-3639.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,



NICK LAMPSON
Chairman
Subcommittee on Energy and
and Environment



BRAD MILLER
Chairman
Subcommittee on Investigations and
Oversight

Cc: F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Investigations and
Oversight

Bob Inglis
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Energy and
Environment