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May 8, 2007

Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr.
Undersecretary, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Under Secretary Lautenbacher,

In July 2004, Members of this Committee wrote to the President to ask that NASA be directed to maintain operations of the Tropical Rainfall Measuring Mission (TRMM) satellite, which it had intended to shut down. We learned after NASA's announcement that data from that satellite was making significant contribution to both NOAA and the Navy in tracking hurricanes. Fortunately, the agencies have worked together to continue TRMM operations. Still, we remain concerned that TRMM can remain in service until the launch of the successor Global Precipitation Measurement mission.

One of the lessons Congress took away from TRMM is that NASA and NOAA were failing to systematically evaluate the technology and capabilities from NASA's Earth-observing missions for application to NOAA's operational responsibilities. We saw with TRMM that such transfers were indeed occurring, but it was mostly on an ad-hoc basis between NASA scientists and NOAA forecasters. The National Research Council had advocated the creation of an interagency panel so that as NASA developed and launched new instruments, NOAA could understand what new capabilities were to be demonstrated and factor those into its operational procedures for the existing forecast models.Further, NOAA could then incorporate those capabilities into following generations of satellites. This Committee, in Section 306 of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Authorization Act of 2005, established that interagency working group and required annual reports describing how NASA and NOAA were improving coordination to achieve better outcomes in transitioning research to operations.

In a briefing to the NOAA Transition Board on May 12, 2006, Chet Koblinsky, Director of the OAR Climate Program Office and Co-Chair of the aforementioned NASA/NOAA Joint Working Group on Research and Operations, indicated that the Working Group intended to submit a report to Congress with the FY 2008 budget request. However, the Committee has yet to receive this report. Please take steps to deliver this report no later than May 15, 2007.

Now, according to the new Director of the National Hurricane Center, Dr. Bill Proenza, we are facing a similar situation in terms of wind data. Dr. Proenza told the Associated Press on March 16 that he has increasing concerns regarding the QuikScat satellite, which is currently two years beyond its five-year design lifetime. Losing the data from the onboard scatterometer instrument could reduce the accuracy of the Center's two-day forecasts by 10 percent and three-day forecasts by 16 percent. This would require the Center to expand the coastal areas receiving hurricane watches and warnings and increase the numbers of persons affected by evacuation orders. Apparently there is no near-term plan to replace the QuikSCAT capability.

Our recent experiences with evacuations clearly illustrate the need for accurate determinations of a hurricane's path. At times, evacuations must be ordered to save lives. However, they carry their own risks and are extremely costly and difficult for state and local governments as well as for our citizens. We must be certain that we use this vital life-saving procedure wisely and effectively. We can only accomplish that with accurate forecasting. Please provide us with information about the short-term options for continuing to obtain the information provided by the QuikSCAT satellite should the loss of this satellite occur during this hurricane season. We also request that you provide us with options NOAA has identified for including the important data obtained by QuikSCAT into NOAA's operational forecasting data stream.

We understand from both the above-mentioned briefing, and from a presentation by Admiral Lautenbacher in January 2006 to the Earth Science and Applications from Space Executive Committee, that QuikScat has been a focus of attention. Accordingly, it is important that NASA and NOAA accelerate the delivery of the report from the Working Group.

The National Academies' Earth Science Decadal Survey interim report in April 2005 warned us that "Today this system of environmental satellites is at risk of collapse...." We see here another instance where we are reliant on a single source of vital data and may at any time find ourselves wondering which way the wind is blowing. That we may not be able to measure such a fundamental parameter highlights once again the gaps in our planning and execution of the critical observational networks that underpin our understanding of the weather and its impact on people and the economy.

Sincerely,

NICK LAMPSON
Chairman
Subcommittee on Energy and Environment