



Lubchenco Faces Bipartisan Criticism from House Appropriations Committee over ITO Cuts – And Answers “I don’t know” to Virtually Every Question about NWS Operations.

(March 21, 2012) NOAA’s plan to eliminate 122 ITO positions came under attack during a hearing on NOAA’s FY 13 budget request on Tuesday, March 20. The Chairman of the Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations Subcommittee, Frank Wolf (R-VA) and the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee (most senior Democrat) Chaka Fattah (D-PA) both expressed their objections to eliminating the ITOs during their questioning of NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco.

Chairman Wolf began his questioning of Dr. Lubchenco by saying he was concerned about the elimination of the ITOs and asked her, “What are they responsible for; how do they work?” She was unable to answer the question but responded instead that the agency’s plan “takes advantage of new technology that is available in a more uniform and reliable fashion.” Chairman Wolf then asked Lubchenco, “How many personnel are there at each WFO?” She responded, “I don’t know.” Wolf asked how many meteorologists there are at each forecast office, and if they work around-the-clock shifts? Lubchenco’s answer, “I don’t know.” Chairman Wolf asked how long it would take to deploy the remote mobile ITO teams to a WFO where there was a problem. Lubchenco’s answer, “I don’t know.” Wolf then asked where the ITO teams will be stationed. Lubchenco responded, “I don’t know.” Wolf then asked how long would it take for the remote ITO teams to get to a WFO? Lubchenco replied, “I don’t know – but there will be better and more reliable service” than there is now.

Chairman Wolf also criticized NOAA’s plans to reduce funding to maintain the buoys used for tsunami warnings. When Dr. Lubchenco assured the committee that this would not reduce the effectiveness of the tsunami warnings, Chairman Wolf confronted her with NOAA’s own budget submission that states “warnings may extend to a larger area than necessary and for a longer time.” At one point Chairman Wolf told Lubchenco, “your folks” (the NWS employees) did a great job with the early warning of the severe tornado outbreak. She said that the advance notice was due to the weather satellites!

The senior Democrat on the committee, Rep. Fattah, told Dr. Lubchenco that he “shared the Chairman’s concerns” about eliminating the ITOs, especially in light of the recent outbreak of severe weather. Rep. Fattah said that he was “very interested in how to avoid these cuts” and that they were unwise in both “substance and symbolism” because they were sending a message that the federal government doesn’t care about the impact of severe weather. “I am still concerned about what it suggests – the idea that at this time we would be removing local

people.” At a loss for words, Dr. Lubchenco responded, “I hear what you are saying.”

Rep. Jose Serrano (D-NY) also urged Dr. Lubchenco to reconsider her opposition to the creation of a Caribbean Tsunami Warning Center in Puerto Rico, explaining that the residents of these U.S territories do not feel safe relying on tsunami warnings issued from Alaska and Hawaii. Lubchenco said a Caribbean Center was not necessary because geographic proximity is not necessary to issue a prompt or reliable warning. Rep. Serrano then asked "if that was the case, why did NOAA put warning centers in Hawaii and Alaska in the first place?" Jane's answer? You guessed it. "I don't know."

As the hearing was closing, Chairman Wolf said that he had recently traveled to Africa and asked Dr. Lubchenco whether the NWS was providing any famine forecasts to Africa to aid in the deprivation he had seen there. Exhibiting further ignorance of the NWS's operations (after three years on the job) she said that the NWS does not. In fact, the NWS's Climate Prediction Center has an entire unit dedicated to doing just that- the Famine Early Warning System. See: <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/fews/> and <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa>

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Pictured: Rep. Chaka Fattah meets with the NWSEO National Council, March 10, 2012

