



**GAO Report sought by NWSEO  
Confirms the vacancy rate is much higher than NWS management claims;  
And that labor money has been diverted to other uses.**

(June 7, 2017) The Government Accountability Office has released a study that confirms the vacancy rate in NWS operational units has reached a point where NWS employees are “unable at times to perform key tasks.” The GAO also found that NWS “staff experienced stress, fatigue and reduced morale resulting from their efforts to cover for vacancies” due to lack of time off and a loss of training. According to the GAO, NWS managers admit “that employees are fatigued and morale is low” and that employees “were demoralized because they had to cover the workload for multiple vacancies.”

***This GAO study was requested in 2015 on behalf of NWSEO by three NWSEO allies on the House Science Committee*** – Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-IL); Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR) and Rep. Don Beyer (D-VA). NWSEO originally requested that the Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act include a provision that required the NWS to prepare a study of the vacancy rate at the NWS and its impact on the public and employees. However, when the Republicans on the House Science Committee objected to including anything requested by the union in an early draft of the Act, these NWSEO supporters on the Committee requested the GAO to conduct an independent study instead. This turned to NWSEO’s advantage because the GAO study neared completion even before the final version of the Act was approved by Congress earlier this year. NWSEO President Dan Sobien and General Counsel Richard Hirn worked with the GAO staff from the beginning of their investigation and received a briefing at GAO headquarters earlier this year on the GAO’s findings before the report was finalized.

***The GAO report rejected the NWS’s bogus method of counting the number of vacancies, and concluded that there are nearly 200 more vacant positions than claimed by NWS leadership.*** NWS told the GAO that the vacancy rate in operational units was only 7 percent at the end of fiscal year 2016. However, the GAO found that the actual vacancy rate in operational units (defined as those 168 NWS offices that issue forecasts or warnings and that are staffed by emergency-essential personnel) rose from 5 percent at the end of fiscal year 2010 (211 positions) to 11 percent at the end of fiscal year 2016 (455 positions). The GAO concluded that the NWS’s method of counting vacant positions “did not provide an accurate reflection of vacancies for a particular unit or position type and did not reflect how NWS has been managing its staffing levels or vacancies. Given these limitations, we did not use these data for reporting vacancy rates.”

***The GAO also found that NWS headquarters directed the six regions and NCEP to hold approximately 5% of all positions in their operational units vacant.*** The GAO reported that the

NWS “had resources to fill vacant operational positions” but that the “NWS adjusted its spend plans to use some of the funds originally intended for labor expenses to support deferred or backlogged operations and maintenance, such as repairing facilities and updating information technology equipment.”

***According to the GAO, NWS management took care of its own, while letting bargaining unit operational positions go vacant.*** “For example, at the end of fiscal year 2016, the number of vacant meteorologist positions . . . had increased by 57 percent (from 98 to 154 vacant positions) from fiscal year 2014. Over the same period, the number of vacant management positions – including MIC, WCM, SOO and ESA, decreased by 29 percent.”

***The GAO report also revealed that NWS management is aware that its plans to further reduce staffing on shift as part of NWS Evolve will endanger the public.*** “Officials in one NWS regional headquarters said that reducing the number of staff on a forecasting shift during fair weather can be risky because severe weather can occur quickly without sufficient time for the operational unit manager to call in additional staff.”

***The GAO report also proved that NWS employees greatly benefit from an agreement NWSEO negotiated in 2001 that requires the agency to temporarily promote employees who perform the duties of a higher graded position that is vacant for more than 20 days.*** According to the GAO, “operational units made 333 temporary promotions in fiscal year 2016.” Without that NWSEO agreement, management would have an even greater financial incentive to leave positions vacant because they could get lower graded employees to perform higher graded work without limit.

***There is an additional study underway that will expose how the NWS uses contractors to avoid hiring bargaining unit employees.*** When the bill reached the Senate, NWSEO ally Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI) added a provision to the Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act, which was recently passed by Congress and signed into law by the President, that requires the NWS to provide an annual report to Congress and the public about its use of contractors instead of Federal employees. This report, which is due by mid-October, must identify the total number of NWS employees, the total number of NWS vacancies, the total number of contractors, and how the cost of the contractors compares to the cost of hiring equivalent Federal employees.

-NWSEO-

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National Weather Service employees.**

**No one works harder for National Weather Service employees than  
National Weather Service employees.  
We are NWSEO.**