



NOAA: 14% of Weather Service staff slots vacant -- union

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Emily Yehle, E&E reporter
Greenwire: Wednesday, May 14, 2014

The National Weather Service is operating with nearly 14 percent of its staff slots unfilled after years of hiring freezes, according to the agency's union.

In the past, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has declined to say exactly how many vacancies exist at the Weather Service, but the NWS Employees Organization recently did its own count, tallying empty positions at every office. It counted 548 openings.

Of those vacancies, the union says 396 are "emergency essential," meaning they would usually be filled with employees who must report to work in extreme weather such as hurricanes, floods and blizzards. They include meteorologists, hydrologists and electronic technicians who keep equipment like radars working.

Bill Hopkins, the union's executive vice president, said leaving 10 percent of such essential positions vacant is "dangerous."

"Some of the vacancies have lasted more than a year," he said in an email. "These positions are labeled 'Emergency Essential' because they are critical to the agency's lifesaving mission. ... To have a long-standing vacancy is playing roulette with the weather."

The tally comes more than three months after NOAA lifted its hiring freeze, which the agency put in place during the across-the-board spending cuts known as sequestration. But union officials say the agency isn't working fast enough to fill positions -- and sometimes shifts employees around by using transfers and promotions.

The issue is complicated by the fact that the Weather Service's budget has been in flux since 2012, when NOAA revealed that NWS has illegally reallocated as much as \$30 million each year. Officials did not personally profit from the transfers; instead, they were trying to cover a shortfall in salaries, taking money from capital improvement funds ([E&ENews PM](#), Sept. 17, 2013).

NOAA is now trying to restructure NWS for the first time in 20 years, planning a workforce analysis that officials say will help them ensure they have the "right people in the right places." The agency is also asking Congress for a larger investment in infrastructure ([Greenwire](#), March 20).

Some weather forecasting offices are fully staffed or missing positions that are not "emergency essential." But others are missing key parts of their staff.

The Sterling, Va., forecasting office, for example, will soon have three vacant meteorologist positions -- two journeyman positions are already empty, while the lead forecaster will soon leave, according to the union's data. The weather forecasting office in Kansas City, Mo., meanwhile, is missing a lead forecaster and will soon have a vacant journeyman position among five total vacancies.

And as hurricane season approaches, the National Hurricane Center is missing six employees, including a lead forecaster and two meteorological interns.

Chris Vaccaro, a spokesman for NWS, said that the agency is working as fast as it can to fill such positions. So far, he said, NWS has posted job announcements for 200 positions, prioritizing critical positions such as lead forecasters.

But he acknowledged that some of those positions are filled internally, merely switching one vacancy for another. He said he could not say how many employees the agency has added to its workforce since it lifted the hiring freeze in January; that number, he said, is a moving target.

"It's been a continuous stream in the hiring process -- from getting announcements on the street to getting the list of best applicants to doing interviews to getting hired," he said.

Vaccaro confirmed the union's number as roughly accurate, though he said he could not provide an official tally of vacancies. But he emphasized that "every role in every shift has always been covered," even if managers have to step into positions themselves or forecasters from other offices filling in.

"Not at one point has the Weather Service dropped the ball on forecasts," he said. "It has been an all-hands-on-deck approach to ensuring that we are able to more than meet our mission."

But the question remains on how long employees can handle that approach. In a report last year, a report commissioned by NOAA pointed out that critical staff shortages make the National Hurricane Center and weather forecasting offices "vulnerable to failure during significant weather events" ([Greenwire](#), May 22, 2013).