



National Weather Service Employees Organization

For immediate release

contact: Christy Fox (202) 907-3036

National Weather Service Reductions to Hit Rural Alaska

(Fairbanks, Alaska) January 17, 2018 - Significant reductions in staffing, services, and hours of operation are occurring at, and being planned by, the National Weather Service (NWS) in Alaska. These reductions in staffing and degradation of services will endanger the people of Alaska by compromising the mission of the NWS to protect lives and property.

Until recently, the NWS had 12 Weather Service Offices (WSOs) that stretched across all of rural Alaska. They were located from Annette Island (Metlakatla) to Barrow (Utqiagvik). These offices provided observations of weather conditions needed for aviation safety; radiosonde (Weather Balloon) observations of the atmosphere, climatological measurements of rain, snow, ice, temperatures and winds; sea surface temperatures, and sea ice observations; river height measurements, local adaptive public and marine forecasts; and most importantly provided weather forecasts and conditions to mariners, the public, and local emergency officials in Bush Alaska via telephone, HF and VHF radio. These WSOs are the eyes, ears, and mouth of the National Weather Service in rural Alaska.

Beginning in 2009 the NWS began reducing hours and services at these WSOs. By June of 2015 the WSOs were closed evenings, the local supervisors were removed, the staffing was reduced 40%, and the WSO staff were ordered to cease providing many services they previously provided to the public and to mariners. In 2016 WSO Valdez was closed permanently. Since 2016, the WSOs have had a 30% staffing shortage.

Starting in August 2017, the NWS reduced Alaska radiosondes by 13%. Radiosonde information affects the determination of rain, snow, or freezing rain in the forecast, and it also affects the forecast of thunderstorm, strong winds, and the possibility of wind shear or turbulence that are critical to aviation. The lack of radiosondes also adversely affects the output of computer weather models for Alaska and Nationwide, especially entering the stormy season of the fall of 2017. The action taken in Alaska contrasts with the approach of Hurricane Irma in September 2017, when the NWS doubled the number of radiosondes launched at 52 locations in the lower 48 to improve forecasts.

(see <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-old-fashioned-weather-balloons-foretell-about-irma-rsquo-s-track/>)

Jerry Steiger, from WSO Nome, is an excellent example of the employees who will be displaced from the WSOs. Jerry worked at WSO Nome for about 25 years. Through his years of experience and local knowledge, Jerry would assist in deciding whether to issue Coastal Flood Warnings. Not only was Jerry a technical expert who would brief the local officials in Nome on the latest forecasts, but Jerry was also one of the emergency responders in Nome who people knew and trusted. Jerry's position was eliminated 2 years ago and the NWS services for Nome have degraded as a result.

The NWS in Alaska has far fewer employees in Alaska than in the lower 48. As an example, the Fairbanks Weather Forecast Office has about the same number of NWS staff as North Platte, NE., yet forecasts for an area 10 times larger. Despite this higher workload, the NWS has maintained an operational staffing shortage across Alaska of 25% for more than 1 year due to positions not being filled, while the rest of the NWS has a staff shortage of 14%. Alaska is again getting shorted on service.

Reducing staffing or closing WSOs in rural Alaska will mean that daily climate records at these locations will end. Since Alaska is undergoing significant climate variation, these WSOs, especially Barrow (Utqiagvik), are very important for climate researchers, as well as for state and local officials planning for future changes in Alaska. Reducing staff would end this climate record, and reduce information that is important to forecasting blizzards, ice storms, and to predicting the changes to come in Arctic Communities such as Barrow (Utqiagvik) (see <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/alaskan-north-slope-climate-change-just-outran-one-our-tools-measure>).

The NWS has been reducing services at the WSOs in rural Alaska for many years. If the WSOs close, local service in these rural communities will end. Keeping the WSOs open and restoring their local services, along with filling vacant positions, will allow the NWS to fulfill its mission of "Protection of Live and Property" ***to all of Alaska.***