

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

March 22, 2018

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Ross,

This past year our country experienced a dangerous and deadly series of hurricanes and wildfires that have devastated many families and communities. In response to these disasters, Congress has appropriated \$51.7 billion in disaster relief and will pass a third disaster appropriations bill bringing the total to well over \$100 billion for the last calendar year.

As we experience stronger and more devastating storms than ever before paired with monumental paradigm shifts due to warming weather like rapid sea ice melt, leaving new unprotected coastline, the federal government must utilize its weather forecasting capabilities to the fullest extent possible. For this reason, we write to express our serious concern about the hundreds of operational vacancies that remain unfilled at the National Weather Service (NWS) and the administration's plans to decrease Weather Service Office (WSO) coverage. This is simply unacceptable. Many of these NWS operational positions directly support public safety and should be filled by permanent, full-time scientists, forecasters, technicians, and support personnel.

According to a Government Accountability Office (GAO) study delivered to Congress in May 2017, the number of operational vacancies across the NWS has increased from five percent of the total number of positions in fiscal year 2010 to eleven percent in fiscal year 2016. The percentage of vacant operational positions in Hawaii is even more severe with sixteen percent of the NWS positions vacant.¹

The number of operational vacancies in Hawaii is alarming. Of particular concern are the five vacancies at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) including two Lead Duty Scientist positions. PTWC is responsible for providing rapid warning for tsunamis generated in Hawaii waters as well as to almost every country around the Pacific rim and to most of the Pacific island states. As one of NWS' two tsunami warning centers, PTWC operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to monitor seismic and sea level activity and issue tsunami warnings.

¹ National Weather Service – State of Hawaii Vacancies (Updated 12/14/2017)

In addition to the vacancy issue at the PTWC, we are also concerned about the administration's budget proposal to merge the PTWC in Hawaii and the National Tsunami Warning Center in Alaska. Maintaining placement of these centers in Alaska and Hawaii ensures that National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is able to carry out its requirements pursuant to the Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act, which requires NOAA to maintain the two centers and that the individual centers serve as back-up for each other. Furthermore, the administration's proposal to eliminate 25 of the current 40 scientists and technicians at these centers will jeopardize their warning capability, and thus the safety of the communities in Hawaii and Alaska, as well as all along the west coast of the United States.

The NWS Alaska Region recently had twelve WSOs that stretch across all of rural Alaska. Beginning in 2009, the NWS began reducing hours and services at these WSOs and by 2016, Alaska offices had a 30 percent staffing shortage with over twenty positions eliminated throughout rural Alaska. The NWS now plans to close all remaining Alaska WSOs in the near future. The reduction at WSOs means that each of the three Weather Forecast Offices (WFOs) must forecast for an area approximately the size of ten WFOs in the lower 48 states, while having little to no increase in staffing. Instead, there has been an operational staffing shortage at Alaska WFOs of 20 to 30 percent for more than a year, due to positions intentionally being left unfilled.

The GAO study also found these vacancies to have a detrimental impact on the operational unit managers and staff because they insist on meeting their critical mission of issuing forecasts and warning despite being short-staffed. GAO reported that "operational unit managers and staff experienced stress, fatigue, and reduced morale resulting from their efforts to cover for vacancies." This outcome is unacceptable and must be addressed immediately.

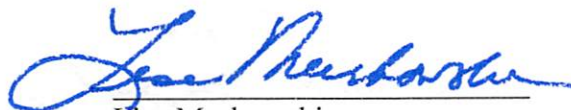
GAO reported that NWS "intends to develop a strategic human capital plan, which officials said could provide a framework for evaluating its hiring action, but does not have a time frame for its development." The threat to public safety from dangerous weather events is too great to wait on the NWS to draft a strategic human capital plan. Our national security, public safety, and economic security are at stake. We ask that you take action now to fill these operational vacancies, reevaluate the current plan to eliminate valuable positions in our rural communities, and provide American taxpayers the forecasts and warnings that they depend upon to carry out their daily lives.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this matter. We look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



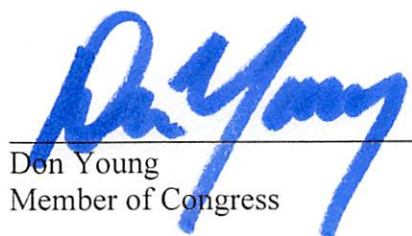
Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



Colleen Hanabusa
Member of Congress



Don Young
Member of Congress



Tulsi Gabbard
Member of Congress

CC: Rear Admiral Timothy Gallaudet
Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
Acting Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere