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Source: BioScience, 59(7) : 558

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2009.59.7.6>

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A Rising Tide of Support for a National Climate Service


 ROBERT E. GROPP

Climate change is a hot topic in the halls of Congress. News coverage has centered on the Waxman-Markey climate change bill, *The American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009* (HR 2454), which the House passed by a slim margin—219 to 212—on 26 June. The House Committee on Science and Technology has also been busy, crafting legislation to create a National Climate Service.

Hot air emanating from some media talking heads might lead the casual observer to believe that Congress routinely creates new agencies; in fact, however, lawmakers rarely direct the establishment of a new federal office. Nonetheless, stakeholders ranging from scientists to local utility managers have been encouraging Congress to create a new climate forecasting function—a “National Climate Service” or “Climate Services Program,” which would be housed in NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration).

NOAA already houses the National Weather Service (NWS), whose mission is to provide “weather, hydrologic, and climate forecasts and warnings,” but weather and climate are different. Weather is a snapshot of atmospheric conditions at a specific place and time, whereas climate is the long-term average pattern of weather for a particular region.

A National Climate Service, supporters assert, could provide decision-makers at all levels of society with the information they need to respond to climate change. The House Science and Technology Committee recently considered HR 2407—the *National Climate Service Act of 2009*. The legislation would (a) advance the understanding of climate variability and change at all geographic scales; (b) provide forecasts, warnings, and information to the public on climate variability and

change and its effects on the public; and (c) support the development of adaptation and response plans by government agencies, the private sector, and the public.

The legislation’s sponsor is Representative Bart Gordon (D–TN), chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology. He asserts: “State and local governments, private industry and resource managers across the country recognize that weather and climate impacts influence many aspects of our lives.... Some of these changes will be positive and offer new opportunities. Others will present challenges. Without more specific information about the magnitude and direction of these changes we will be ill prepared to exploit new opportunities and to adapt to new challenges.”

At a committee hearing in May, NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco expressed the need for a coordinated climate program. “There is unequivocal evidence that the Earth is warming,” she said. “This warming can be seen in increases in global-average surface air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, rising sea level, and changes in many other climate-related variables and impacts.” Lubchenco commends the climate change research efforts of the already established US Global Change Research Program and the US Climate Change Science Program, but says “more work is needed... to understand users’ needs and deliver climate-relevant information to inform decision-making.”

In 2007, the National Academies released *Evaluating Progress of the U.S. Climate Change Science Program: Methods and Preliminary Results*. Lubchenco said this report “highlighted existing gaps in federal programs to provide climate change information, [and] recognized that good progress has been made

to determine many aspects of climate change; however, ‘progress in synthesizing research results or supporting decision-making and risk management has been inadequate.’”

Lubchenco is not alone in urging a greater federal investment in climate-related data synthesis, analysis, and products. Other hearing witnesses also called for an institutional structure that would work closely and collaboratively with other agencies and end users of climate data.

The only apparent concern about a new climate program is whether it should be an office separate from the NWS. Richard Hirn, general counsel and legislative director for the NWS Employees Organization, cautioned during congressional hearings that a new office would not only “duplicate the historic and current mission, programs, and services” of the NWS but also draw resources from it.

Members of the committee responded to these issues. Representatives Brian Baird (D–WA), chairman of the Energy and Environment Subcommittee, and Bob Inglis (R–SC), the ranking minority member of the subcommittee, amended HR 2407 to set up a three-year process during which the director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy will “evaluate alternative structures to support a collaborative, interagency research and operational program that will achieve the goal of meeting the needs of decisionmakers.”

On 3 June, by a 24–12 vote, the Committee on Science and Technology reported out HR 2407 to the full House of Representatives, where the bill awaits further action.

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doi:10.1025/bio.2009.59.7.6