

Weather satellite need defended by climate experts

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(AP) -- Business, academic and environmental leaders are stressing the importance of weather satellites in an era of tight federal budgets.

"The stakes are high and the challenge is great," at a time when [extreme weather](#) is happening more frequently, Michael Freilich, earth science director for NASA, said at a briefing at the Forum on [Earth Observation](#).

Current earth observing satellites have outlasted their planned lifetime, he said, but they won't last forever and budget shortfalls for replacements threaten to create a gap in coverage.

Even President Barack Obama weighed in. In an interview that aired Tuesday on NBC's "Today" show, Obama said that among the things that need to be preserved in a time of [budget cuts](#) are "government functions like food safety and [weather satellites](#)."

[National Weather Service](#) director Jack Hayes said the threatened polar-orbiting satellites were vital in forecasting "Snowmageddon," the 2010 blizzard that staggered much of the Northeast.

The agency ran a "what if," analysis, Hayes explained, to see how the forecasts would have looked without satellite data and the result was a prediction that would have underestimated the snow by 50 percent, he said. Similar "what if" studies are planned for forecasts of the tornadoes that devastated Tuscaloosa, Ala., and Joplin, Mo., he said.

Most people are aware of the geostationary satellites that provide pictures of much of the globe from a high level, but the lower polar [orbiting satellites](#) not only view more of the planet in a regular progression but also collect detailed information on moisture, temperatures and other data used by the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#)..

The polar satellites are especially important three to five days before a weather outbreak, Hayes said.

People tend to talk about forecasts in terms of extreme weather, but it's also important to collect and study data over the long term to see how things are changing in certain areas and to anticipate the future, said John Townshend of the University of Maryland.

"We've got to recognize that climate change is occurring, whether or not you believe in global warming," Townshend said. "Climate changes from year-to-year."

Paul Walsh of Atmospheric & Environmental Research, Inc. explained that insurance companies depend on forecasts to be ready to help their policy holders.

And even something as mundane as grocery stocking depends on good forecasts, he explained. For example, Walmart has found that when a hurricane hits there is a big spike in sales of Pop-Tarts and prepared chicken products, so they have to have extra stock on hand.

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