

Experts call on Congress to create first US Weather Commission

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A supercell thunderstorm menaces central Oklahoma on May 17, 2010. Tornadoes and hurricanes have killed more than 2,000 Americans and wreaked billions of dollars in damage over the last decade. Credit: ©UCAR. Photo by Carlye Calvin.

With the U.S. economy vulnerable to weather events costing billions of dollars, an expert panel today asked Congress to create the first U.S. Weather Commission. The commission would provide guidance to policymakers on leveraging weather expertise across government and the private sector to better protect lives and businesses.

"The nation must focus its [weather](#) resources on the areas of greatest need in order to keep our economy competitive and provide maximum protection of lives and property," says Thomas Bogdan, president of the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. "Emerging technologies are providing an opportunity to create forecasts that are

more accurate and detailed than ever, and to communicate them instantly to key communities and businesses. We need a U.S. Weather Commission to ensure that our entire [weather research](#) and technology enterprise provides maximum benefit to the nation."

At a time of fast-changing technological innovation, the commission would advise federal policymakers on setting priorities for improving forecasts and creating a more weather-proof nation. The goal is to help ensure cost-effective spending on the nation's [weather systems](#) while minimizing the impacts of both major storms, which last year alone cost about \$52 billion, and normal fluctuations in weather, which have an estimated annual economic impact of \$485 billion.

Earlier this year, the [National Academy of Sciences](#) released a hallmark report, [Weather Services](#) for the Nation: Becoming Second to None. The report concluded that, even with recent concerted and much-needed efforts to modernize the National Weather Service, the country faces challenges in harnessing the best science and private sector resources available for protecting the nation from weather impacts.

These challenges are rooted in evolving scientific and technological advances, rapidly changing needs of the nation's weather information consumers, and an increasingly capable and growing third-party community of weather services providers.

Congress has twice created an ocean commission for setting direction on commerce, research, and defense related to the world's oceans. But there has never been a U.S. Weather Commission, even though weather has far-reaching effects on all Americans.

Commissioners would provide guidance on issues such as making appropriate investments in satellite and radar systems, protecting vulnerable communities, setting research priorities, and meeting the

needs of key sectors, ranging from agriculture to utilities to the U.S. armed forces.

"Weather is immeasurably important to public safety and our economic competitiveness," says Pam Emch, a senior staff engineer/scientist with Northrop Grumman Corporation and one of the panelists. "Effective organization of the diverse entities that span our weather enterprise is necessary for economic stability, innovation, and the good of the nation."

"Improved [weather information](#) can be an engine for economic growth," says panelist William Gail, co-founder and chief technology officer of the Global Weather Corporation. "As we develop increasingly detailed understanding of our atmosphere, there is enormous potential for helping the public and businesses."

"We must keep pace with accelerating scientific and technological advances and meet expanding user needs in our increasingly information-centric society," says panelist John Armstrong, chair of the Committee on the Assessment of the [National Weather Service's](#) Modernization Program.

Bogdan says that a commission approach, guided by key actors across the entire weather enterprise, will provide needed direction and consensus.

"The U.S. Weather Commission offers the promise of better research, state-of-the-art prediction, and protection for the health and prosperity of the U.S.," he says. "It will also foster growth for the innovative private weather sector we have all come to rely upon. This is an issue that affects all members of Congress and all their constituents, no matter where they live."

Today's panel briefing was the first step in a process that will continue

into the next Congress. The panel's next steps are to brief staff and members on the importance of the commission and the role it will play, seeking their guidance and support for establishing the commission in 2013.

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