

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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July 11, 2025

Mr. Duane Townsend
Acting Inspector General
Office of Inspector General
Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Mr. Townsend:

We write to urgently request an immediate and thorough investigation into the catastrophic flash flood event that struck Central Texas over the July 4th holiday weekend. This disaster has led to an unprecedented loss of life, with the death toll currently exceeding 100, including at least 30 children, and search efforts continuing for those still missing.¹

Forecasts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Weather Service (NWS) provide daily weather information and predictions that emergency responders and everyday Americans use to prepare for and respond to emergencies. NWS' around-the-clock weather prediction is essential for the safety of people and communities, as well as coordination with federal, state, and local partners in times of emergency. As response and recovery efforts are underway following the recent tragedy in Texas, the American people deserve answers as to whether this tragedy could have been prevented and what is needed to ensure it never happens again.

NWS is essential to ensuring that Americans have timely and reliable weather, water, climate, and environmental information.² Individuals and businesses rely on NWS to provide the data and information contained in daily weather forecasts, including those accessed through apps owned by private companies.³ In order for NWS to be able to provide this timely and reliable data, it is critical that the agency employ a sufficient number of experts.⁴ Sufficient staffing is vital, particularly for tracking and responding to extreme weather when speed is of the

¹ *Death Toll Reaches at Least 119 in Texas Floods, With 173 Missing*, New York Times (July 9, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/07/09/us/texas-floods-missing-search.html).

² Weather.gov, *About the National Weather Service* (online at www.weather.gov/about/) (accessed July 8, 2025).

³ *Your Weather Forecast is About to Get a Lot Worse*, Vox (May 12, 2025) (online at www.vox.com/climate/412458/weather-service-forecast-noaa-climate-flood-cuts).

⁴ Government Accountability Office, *Additional Actions Needed to Improve the Agency's Reform Efforts* (Oct. 12, 2021) (GAO -21-103792) (online at www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-103792).

essence. For example, a few minutes' difference in issuing a tornado watch, warning, or emergency can mean the difference between life and death.⁵ Unfortunately, NWS has long been understaffed. A 2017 GAO report found that staff vacancies had doubled since 2010, and NWS struggled to fill the vacancies.⁶

While NWS did issue several flood warning alerts, including one indicating “a large and deadly flood wave” at 5:34 am Friday that urged residents and campers in Kerr County to seek higher ground, there are concerns about the effectiveness of those warnings.⁷ Additionally, NWS sent out flash flood warnings triggering automatic alerts to cell phones and weather radios in the Kerr County area. The county also uses a CodeRED system, which requires residents to enroll in order to receive emergency alerts. Kerrville's mayor, Joe Herring, told reporters that he received a single flash flood alert from the CodeRED system at 6:00 am, but that he did not receive any similar notice directly from NWS.⁸ Some residents reported receiving no alerts whatsoever.⁹ While numerous external factors, including lack of data or cellphone service coverage or the early hours during which the disaster occurred, may have hindered communication, the apparent breakdown in communication between alert originators and residents—and the appalling scale of the tragedy—must raise questions about the effectiveness of natural disaster alerting systems.¹⁰ Further, it is crucial that we better understand whether NWS' forecasting and notifications were adequate; if coordination with federal, state, and local partners was sufficient; and how NWS and NOAA can better reduce and prevent this kind of devastating loss of life in the future.

Rather than working to make NWS stronger and more effective, the Trump Administration and the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) have focused on staffing and resource cuts that risk seriously jeopardizing NOAA and NWS' capacity. Arbitrary cuts to vital services like NWS hurt emergency preparedness and put lives in danger. Starting from an already small baseline number of staff, NWS has lost more than 10% of its workforce since the beginning of the Trump Administration.¹¹ Because of these cuts, the agency is preparing for

⁵ Weather.gov, *Understand Tornado Alerts* (online at www.weather.gov/safety/tornado-ww) (accessed May 23, 2025).

⁶ Government Accountability Office, National Weather Service: Actions Have Been Taken to Fill Increasing Vacancies, but Opportunities Exist to Improve and Evaluate Hiring (May 24, 2017) (GAO-17-364) (online at www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-364).

⁷ *Weather Warnings Gave Officials a 3 Hour, 21 Minute Window to Save Lives in Kerr County. What Happened Then Remains Unclear*, Texas Tribune (July 8, 2025) (online at www.texastribune.org/2025/07/08/texas-weather-service-warning-kerr-county/).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Texas Officials Give Few Answers to Growing Questions About Response to Deadly Floods*, NBC News (July 8, 2025) (online at www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-officials-give-answers-growing-questions-response-kerr-county-de-rcna217515).

¹⁰ *Weather Warnings Gave Officials a 3 Hour, 21 Minute Window to Save Lives in Kerr County. What Happened Then Remains Unclear*, Texas Tribune (July 8, 2025) (online at www.texastribune.org/2025/07/08/texas-weather-service-warning-kerr-county/).

¹¹ *The Weather Service Had a Plan to Reinvent Itself. Did DOGE Stop It?*, New York Times (May 15, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/05/15/us/politics/national-weather-service-cuts-trump.html).

what an internal document has described as “severe shortages” in staffing—particularly at local weather offices, which perform the essential work that keeps weather reports up-to-date and accurate for communities across the country.¹² As of May 2025, approximately 40% of the NWS’ 122 local forecasting offices had staffing gaps, with 30 offices around the country lacking a chief meteorologist.¹³ The Trump Administration has confirmed these severe staffing issues, with a government spokesperson stating that “several local NWS offices are temporarily operating below around-the-clock staffing.”¹⁴

At the time of the tragic flash flooding in Texas on July 5, 2025, multiple positions at local NWS offices were vacant. An office that covers some of the areas hit by the flooding lacked a staff forecaster and a meteorologist in charge.¹⁵ Another nearby office was missing a warning coordination meteorologist and science officer, positions that work with local emergency managers and help warn and evacuate residents.¹⁶ Until April 30, 2025, the position of warning coordination meteorologist in the Austin/San Antonio office had been held by Paul Yura, a long time NWS employee who had spent over 15 years at the Austin/San Antonio office alone. Mr. Yura took an early retirement package offered as part of the Trump Administration’s effort to cut the NOAA workforce.¹⁷ The vacancy rate at both of these Texas offices is approximately twice what it was at the start of the Trump Administration in January 2025.¹⁸

Beyond Texas, multiple local offices have had to make cuts to overnight staffing, potentially resulting in delayed weather alerts and poorer tracking of storms that intensify overnight.¹⁹ Certain local weather offices in Kansas have had their hours reduced, despite those

¹² *Weather Service Prepares for ‘Degraded Operations’ Amid Trump Cuts*, New York Times (Apr. 16, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/04/16/climate/national-weather-service-forecast-doge-trump.html).

¹³ *This Tornado Mayhem Is a Warning*, The Atlantic (May 19, 2025) (online at www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/05/tornado-weather-alerts-doge-cuts/682847/); *US Weather Forecasting is More Crippled than Previously Known as Hurricane Season Nears*, CNN (May 2, 2025) (online at www.cnn.com/2025/05/02/weather/nws-forecasting-layoffs-trump).

¹⁴ *The Weather Service Had a Plan to Reinvent Itself. Did DOGE Stop It?*, New York Times (May 15, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/05/15/us/politics/national-weather-service-cuts-trump.html).

¹⁵ *As Floods Hit, Key Roles Were Vacant at Weather Service Offices in Texas*, New York Times (July 5, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/07/05/us/politics/texas-floods-warnings-vacancies.html).

¹⁶ *Trump Says NWS Staffing Levels Didn’t Affect Texas Storm Preparedness*, Axios (July 6, 2025) (online at www.axios.com/2025/07/07/trump-nws-texas-flood-warnings-funding-cuts-scrutiny); *As Floods Hit, Key Roles Were Vacant at Weather Service Offices in Texas*, New York Times (July 5, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/07/05/us/politics/texas-floods-warnings-vacancies.html).

¹⁷ *Head of Local Weather Warnings Takes Early Retirement as NOAA Cuts Continue*, KXAN (Apr. 21, 2025) (online at www.kxan.com/weather/weather-blog/head-of-local-weather-warnings-takes-early-retirement-as-noaa-cuts-continue/).

¹⁸ *As Floods Hit, Key Roles Were Vacant at Weather Service Offices in Texas*, New York Times (July 5, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/07/05/us/politics/texas-floods-warnings-vacancies.html).

¹⁹ *Former NWS Directors Warn Staff Cuts Could Lead to Unnecessary Deaths During Severe Weather*, NBC San Diego (May 6, 2025) (online at www.nbcsandiego.com/news/national-international/former-nws-directors-warn-trump-staff-cuts-deaths-severe-weather); *Summer Brings Hurricanes, Tornadoes and Extreme Heat—And an Underresourced National Weather Service*, Scientific American (June 6, 2025) (online at www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/the-national-weather-service-is-understaffed-and-underfunded-heres-

same offices having previously tracked multiple tornadoes that arrived near or after dark. Regional offices are now covering much broader areas after agreeing to “keep an eye on the weather” in areas where the local office was closed overnight.²⁰ Notably, those regional offices have also had their staff reduced this year.²¹

The Trump Administration has already attempted to reverse some of its staffing cuts to NWS. Staff have been diverted to field offices to address shortages.²² NOAA also requested that employees consider transferring to fill critical roles left open by DOGE cuts.²³ Now the Administration has had to backtrack even further, lifting its hiring freeze on NWS in an effort to hire approximately 100 operational roles.²⁴ This is just the latest in an overall trend in which the Trump Administration made overly broad cuts that it later had to walk back once it became clear how large the impact would be on the services Americans rely on every day.

There has been bipartisan concern about NWS vulnerabilities, with five former NWS directors—from both Democratic and Republican administrations—signing an open letter warning about attacks on the NWS.²⁵ Their letter notes that due to reduced staffing, the NWS “will have an impossible task to continue its current level of services,” and emphasizes that cuts to NWS activities will negatively affect weather warnings.²⁶ Sharing staff and replacing less than a quarter of the lost capacity is unlikely to fill the gap and means “services will inevitably suffer.”²⁷

While the direct impact of nationwide staffing shortages on the July 5 disaster is unclear, the tragic loss of life suffered underscores the urgent need to fully understand what contributed to this disaster and how lives can be best protected moving forward. Rigorous investigation is needed not only to provide answers to grieving communities in Central Texas, but also to save lives in future extreme weather events. We request a comprehensive evaluation of NOAA and NWS’ ability to meet their statutory obligations and an investigation into the preparation for,

why-that/).

²⁰ *No 24-Hour National Weather Service in Goodland, Kansas? We’ll All Pay, One Way or Another*, Kansas Reflector (June 1, 2025) (online at kansasreflector.com/2025/06/01/no-24-hour-national-weather-service-in-goodland-kansas-well-all-pay-one-way-or-another/).

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Stabilizing ‘Operations,’ the National Weather Service Hires Again After Trump Cuts*, NPR (June 3, 2025) (online at www.npr.org/2025/06/03/nx-s1-5422198/nws-national-weather-service-hires-again-trump-cuts).

²³ *NOAA is Scrambling to Fill Forecasting Jobs After Cuts to the National Weather Service*, NBC News (May 16, 2025) (online at www.nbcnews.com/science/environment/noaa-scrambling-fill-forecasting-jobs-cuts-national-weather-service-rcna207050).

²⁴ *Stabilizing ‘Operations,’ the National Weather Service Hires Again After Trump Cuts*, NPR (June 3, 2025) (online at www.npr.org/2025/06/03/nx-s1-5422198/nws-national-weather-service-hires-again-trump-cuts).

²⁵ *Former Weather Service Leaders Warn Staffing Cuts Could Lead to ‘Loss of Life’*, New York Times (May 2, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/05/02/weather/nws-staffing-cuts-trump.html).

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *New Hires Will Still Leave the NWS Dangerously Understaffed, Meteorologists Say*, Scientific American (June 5, 2025) (online at www.scientificamerican.com/article/new-nws-hires-wont-make-up-for-trump-cuts-meteorologists-say/).

response to, and coordination around the catastrophic Texas floods. In conducting this assessment, we request that you address the following issues:

1. Review all coordination and communications between Texas state and local authorities and emergency personnel regarding the July 2025 flooding in Central Texas;
2. Review all communications, including all emergency alerts and notifications, issued by NWS regarding the July 2025 flooding in Central Texas;
3. Review all communications and coordination with local media regarding the July 2025 flooding in Central Texas;
4. Review the use of the Emergency Alert System and the Wireless Emergency Alert System during and around the July 2025 flooding in Central Texas;
5. Review NWS and state and local personnel compliance with emergency management policies, procedures, and best practices regarding the July 2025 flooding in Central Texas;
6. How NWS will ensure adequate staffing, to include 24-hour staffing, at all local NWS offices for the 2025 hurricane season and calendar year;
7. A detailed and comprehensive list of current NWS vacancies the Trump Administration intends to fill, including the responsibilities of each role, the length of the vacancy, whether the vacancy has been subject to a hiring freeze, a description of any efforts by the Trump Administration to fill each vacancy to date, and a description of any planned efforts to fill each vacancy;
8. How NWS and NOAA coordinate with federal, state, and local partners and emergency personnel, particularly during times of reduced staffing and capacity;
9. How the agency can improve the accuracy and communication of its forecasts to local officials;
10. A full accounting of employees who separated or will be separated from federal service at NWS or NOAA as a result of being probationary employees, taking the deferred resignation program (or “Fork in the Road” offer), accepting an early retirement incentive, or as part of a reduction in force, from January 20, 2025, including whether any of those vacancies had an effect on the response to the Texas floods; and
11. All documents and communications between NWS employees and NOAA and/or the Department of Commerce regarding staffing at NWS and its local offices, including any concerns raised by NWS local office staff.


The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight

Mr. Duane Townsend


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committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Committee Democratic staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Greg Casar
Member of Congress



Jasmine Crockett
Member of Congress



Robert Garcia
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Chairman

Laura Grimm, Chief of Staff performing the duties of Under Secretary of Commerce for
Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration