Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 16, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Ms. Laura Grimm
Acting Adminsitrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick and Administrator Grimm:

We write to express deep concern regarding staffing reductions at the National Weather Service (NWS) and plans for Temporary Duty assignments (TDYs) in California, especially considering the already active fire season. On June 2, 2025, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) released a statement outlining steps the agency will take to attempt to sustain mission-critical operations at NWS offices. This plan includes the use of TDYs to help fill workforce vacancies caused by the Department of Government Efficiency's (DOGE) efforts to push federal employees out of the workforce. This reduction in the NWS workforce has left regional offices across California critically understaffed, endangering lives and threatening California's economy.

There are six NWS offices across California—Eureka, Sacramento, San Francisco, Hanford, Los Angeles, and San Diego —and four other offices located in neighboring states which cover portions of California. The Sacramento and Hanford offices were most impacted by DOGE staffing reductions; the Sacramento office currently has a 50 percent vacancy rate, and the Hanford office has a 61.5 percent vacancy rate, one of the worst in the country.[1] These two offices are responsible for providing more than 7 million Californians with extreme weather warnings. Understaffing has forced these offices to cut their hours of operation and limit forecasting and weather warnings.

The NWS provides warnings and forecasts for wildfires and burned areas, including issuing fire weather warnings, red flag warnings, burned area debris flow warnings, and other public weather-related preparedness information.[2] In addition to providing information regarding severe weather to the surrounding populace, NWS meteorologists can also be assigned to specific fire incidents.[3] NWS meteorologists provide the Incident Management Team (IMT) with real-time weather information such as thunderstorm activity (a high hazard due to lightning strikes) and fire weather (wind direction, wind speed, humidity, temperature, and other information). They also provide specialized information to helicopter and plane crews fighting incipient and ongoing fires, which is critical to the safe and effective management of fires. The significant staffing cuts to these NWS offices will affect standard fire weather forecasting and warnings and the safe execution of firefighting efforts, which can have fatal consequences.

More than 2.3 million acres in California face significant fire risk.[4] There have been multiple dangerous fires so far this summer in California, including, the Ranch Fire near Los Angeles which burned 4,293 acres and forced evacuations of Apple Valley[5]; a second near Mono Lake, which closed Highway 395 and forced evacuations of

[1] Trump cuts hit California National Weather Service offices hard - Los Angeles Times
[2] vlab.noaa.gov/web/nws-heritage/-/the-unsung-heroes-of-firefighting-the-nws-forecasters-in-the-field
[3] noaa.gov/stories/imets-day-in-life-of-noaa-fire-weather-forecaster-robert-rickey
[4] https://calmatters.org/environment/wildfires/2025/02/california-wildlfires-high-hazard-new-maps/
[5] fire.ca.gov/incidents/2025/6/10/ranch-fire

Mono City and Lundy Canyon[6]; and a third, the Bonanza Fire, which forced evacuations near Shingle Springs, CA.[7] Wind speed is strongly and consistently associated with the number of acres burned.[8] This was definitely the case for the Eaton, Palisade, and Ranch Fires in Southern California where the strong Santa Ana winds drove fire spread. In California, fire is a year-round risk, and this reality requires consistent, high-quality, and reliable weather forecasting data to protect Californians.

Critically, the Sacramento and Hanford offices provide forecasts specifically tailored to the needs of California's $50 billion agriculture industry.[9] These forecasts provide information that helps farmers plan their planting and harvesting cycles, which is especially important in California, where the climate fluctuates between wet and dry years. Staffing shortages at these NWS offices may result in direct harm to farmers, economic losses for the state and country, and a less stable food supply.

Even with the agency's TDY plan, which will take time to implement and train relocated employees, NWS will suffer from hundreds of personnel shortages. We have serious concerns regarding this plan, which appears to be a temporary and inadequate fix, and its impact on California NWS offices. Consequently, we request answers to the following questions by July 31, 2025:

1. Please provide a breakdown of vacancies at California NWS offices by specialized roles. Please include information on vacancies prior to January 20, 2025, as well.
2. What is the minimum staffing level at the Sacramento and Hanford offices required to maintain 24/7 weather forecasts and weather balloon launches?
3. How many TDYs and new permanent employees will be added to California NWS offices? How long will these positions take to fill?
4. What is the anticipated impact to fire weather-related work? Will there be sufficient staffing to provide for incident-specific meteorologists?
5. What is the expected impact of these staffing shortages on farmers and the food supply chain?

The safety and lives of millions of Americans as well as the economic success of California depend on weather forecasts from the state's NWS offices. Protecting human lives from severe weather events is not a partisan issue, and it is important that the NWS has the workforce required to meet its core mandate to protect human life. Thank you, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Adam B. Schiff
United States Senator

Alex Padilla
United States Senator

[6] inciweb.wildfire.gov/incident-information/cainf-inn-fire-2025
[7] fire.ca.gov/incidents/2025/6/17/bonanza-fire
[8] Research Spotlight: Ignitions and Wind Speed are Strongest Drivers of Area Burned in Santa Ana Wind Fires | U.S. Geological Survey
[9] www.cdfa.ca.gov/Statistics/