

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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<http://science.house.gov>

July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick,

We write to you to demand your testimony before the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology regarding staff shortages at the National Weather Service (NWS) and your plan to address them. The NWS is a critical public safety agency. In addition to its role as the source of everyday weather data for the country, the NWS is charged with forecasting extreme weather events and communicating those forecasts promptly to the public in order to save lives and livelihoods. Americans rely on the NWS every single day to keep us safe. But the NWS is only as strong as its people. And under your leadership, the Department of Commerce (DOC) has overseen an indiscriminate wave of firings, deferred resignations, and early retirements that has thrown the NWS into crisis. The dangers arising from that crisis have been laid bare in the wake of the horrifying, tragic flooding that struck parts of Central Texas on July 4<sup>th</sup>. While it is too soon to draw definitive conclusions about what happened, it is already clear that this is precisely the type of situation in which the existence of a short-staffed, depleted NWS heightens the risk of tragedy. There will be more such extreme weather events – there always are. You must appear before the Committee immediately and explain to us how you intend to restore the NWS to full strength as quickly as possible so that the agency will be fully prepared to carry out its lifesaving mission when the next disaster strikes.

We are heartbroken at the scale and magnitude of the tragedy in Texas. As of this writing, at least 111 people are confirmed dead from flooding in Kerr County and surrounding counties, while at least 173 people remain missing.<sup>1</sup> At least 30 of the confirmed dead were children.<sup>2</sup> Agonizing stories have emerged of entire families swept away, vacationers making anguished last phone calls, and the unimaginable loss of at least 27 campers and staff members at Camp Mystic.<sup>3</sup> Our prayers are with the families grieving the loss of their loved ones, the local officials overseeing rescue and recovery efforts, and the emergency responders bravely continuing with search efforts

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/09/us/texas-floods-missing-search.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

amidst an extraordinarily difficult situation. The entire country stands with them as they confront this unthinkable tragedy.

As the Ranking Members of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology (“the Committee”) and the Subcommittee on Environment, our job is to understand what happened in Texas so that we can strive to reduce the likelihood that it will ever happen again. We acknowledge that we are still in the early days of this tragedy, and it will take time to fully assess the actions of federal, state, and local officials to determine whether any shortcomings may have worsened the catastrophe and led to deaths that could have been prevented. But even now, reporting already suggests that severe staff shortages at local NWS offices may have hampered the ability of the NWS to effectively communicate and coordinate with local officials in the early morning hours of July 4<sup>th</sup>, as the escalating danger of flash flooding started to emerge. Several crucial positions are vacant in the San Angelo Weather Forecasting Office of the NWS, which is responsible for Kerr County, including the office’s meteorologist-in-charge, senior hydrologist, and staff forecaster.<sup>4</sup> Critical vacancies also exist in the nearby San Antonio Weather Forecasting Office of the NWS, which is responsible for other areas impacted by the flooding, including the office’s warning coordination meteorologist and science officer.<sup>5</sup> Many of these positions are dedicated to flood planning and coordination with local emergency managers, including the development of emergency warning alerts and evacuation plans for local residents. This is a vital element of the broader NWS mission. For the NWS, accurate forecasting is only the beginning; effectively communicating those forecasts to the public and coordinating emergency responses based on those forecasts is essential to the protection of life and property. These vacancies raise the disturbing possibility that communication and coordination between the NWS and local officials during the evening of July 3<sup>rd</sup> and early morning of July 4<sup>th</sup> may have been impaired, even as the NWS issued increasingly dire forecasts about the rising dangers from flash flooding that would soon overtake the region.<sup>6</sup>

The critical staff shortages in the NWS San Angelo and San Antonio offices are emblematic of the crisis afflicting the broader NWS. Similar vacancies exist at local NWS offices across the country. But while staffing issues have long been a problem for the NWS, the current crisis has not appeared out of thin air. It is a crisis of the Trump Administration’s own deliberate making. Under your leadership, Secretary Lutnick, the Department of Commerce has made a series of disastrous personnel decisions that have stretched the NWS past its breaking point. In February, DOC oversaw the mass firing of NWS probationary employees.<sup>7</sup> Between February and May, DOC authorized repeated offers of “deferred resignation” and early retirement to NWS employees.<sup>8</sup> Throughout those months, DOC and the White House maintained a strict hiring freeze for the NWS that prevented the agency from filling the vacancies that had been created.<sup>9</sup> As a result of these actions, the NWS rapidly lost nearly 600 employees from a workforce that

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/05/us/politics/texas-floods-warnings-vacancies.html>.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/national-weather-service-layoffs-trump-doge-a65360a1eb2500b7d47c9c966e383f4a>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/03/20/noaa-offers-buyouts-early-retirement/82573145007/>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2025/04/16/national-weather-service-buyouts-staff-shortages-trump-administration/>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/02/weather/nws-rehiring-meteorologists>.

only numbered around 4,200 staffers when the Trump Administration took office, a devastating staffing reduction for an agency that was already overstretched.<sup>10</sup>

These moves were made with a total lack of strategic planning or purpose. They appear to have been designed simply to drive out as many employees as possible and mindlessly reduce staffing levels to new depths. The effects were felt immediately. In March, weather balloon launches were reduced and suspended at local field offices across the country due to staffing shortages.<sup>11</sup> In April, the NWS and its union agreed to a series of measures that would allow for “degraded operations” due to staffing shortages.<sup>12</sup> In May, several local weather forecasting offices across the country ceased overnight operations for the first time in over half a century due to staffing shortages.<sup>13</sup> This was a crisis below the headlines, but to anyone paying attention – to anyone who cared to look – it was indisputable that the risk of tragedy was increasing with each passing month. And now, in these awful circumstances, we are forced to contemplate the possibility that it has arrived.

Secretary Lutnick, we warned you this would happen. On February 18<sup>th</sup> – the very day you were confirmed to be the Secretary of Commerce – we sent a letter imploring you to protect “employees performing work necessary for public safety and national security,” such as NWS employees, from mass firings.<sup>14</sup> You failed to do so. On April 16<sup>th</sup>, after press reporting about the NWS plan for degraded operations, we noted that “lives are on the line” and called on you and President Trump to lift the hiring freeze for NWS so the agency could be restored to full capacity.<sup>15</sup> You failed to do so. Finally, on May 19<sup>th</sup>, as the NWS desperately struggled to operate in the wake of these disastrous personnel actions, we sent a letter to the White House imploring the administration to lift the hiring freeze and let the NWS hire the people it needed. In our letter, we wrote:

The country needs qualified, dedicated experts in place at forecasting offices around the country before the next great outbreak of hurricanes, wildfires, or whatever extreme weather may threaten the nation. It is no exaggeration to say that lives depend on it. ... The NWS is a crown jewel of the federal government, a lifesaving public safety agency on the front lines of extreme weather events in every corner of the country every single day. Now President Trump and DOGE have pushed NWS to the brink of collapse. We implore you – for the sake of every American who will find themselves in harm’s way from hurricanes, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, and more – to grant a public safety exemption to the National Weather Service and lift its hiring freeze immediately. Do not wait for an avoidable tragedy. Do it now before it is too late.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2025/05/16/weather-service-offices-overnight-cuts-map/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.axios.com/2025/03/21/nws-layoffs-cuts-weather-balloons-forecasts>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/16/climate/national-weather-service-forecast-doge-trump.html>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2025/05/16/weather-service-offices-overnight-cuts-map/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://democrats-science.house.gov/news/press-releases/committee-leaders-demand-commerce-secretary-lutnick-protect-employees-from-musks-mindless-doge-firings>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://democrats-science.house.gov/news/press-releases/ranking-member-lofgrens-statement-on-degraded-services-at-weather-forecasting-offices-as-a-result-of-trump-firings>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://democrats-science.house.gov/news/press-releases/ranking-members-lofgren-and-amo-implore-trump-administration-to-end-reckless-hiring-freeze-at-nws>.

Once again, tragically, you failed to listen. Rather than fully lifting the hiring freeze for the entire NWS and working urgently to fill critical vacancies, the administration provided only a narrow, limited exemption for roughly 125 vacancies, less than one quarter of the staffers who had been pushed out in the preceding months.<sup>17</sup> It appears that few, if any, of even those vacancies have been filled since that limited exemption was granted, as the positions have not yet been posted in the hiring portal for the federal government.<sup>18</sup> The Trump Administration created a crisis at the NWS, and upon finally realizing it, responded belatedly with half-measures that were utterly inadequate to the scale of the crisis. The administration's treatment of the NWS displays a reckless disregard for public safety that should never have been allowed to occur with an agency whose mission is so vital for keeping Americans safe.

It will take time to fully understand whether any part of this past weekend's tragedy in Texas could have been avoided. We cannot rush to judgment based on the limited information available to us now. But it is apparent to us, Secretary Lutnick, that your actions to drastically slash staffing at the National Weather Service have increased the broader risks to Americans of extreme weather events by impairing the ability of the NWS to do its job. Simply put, you cut too deep. You refused to listen to the warnings from experts, from Congress, and from the NWS itself. And the flooding in Central Texas illustrates, in the most terrible fashion, the disastrous risks you invite by taking the lifesaving role of the NWS for granted.

Now the time for warnings is over. The time for action has arrived. You must take accountability for this crisis and address it as quickly as possible in order to keep the country safe. We demand that you appear before the Committee before the August recess – no later than the week of July 21<sup>st</sup> – to testify about how you plan to solve the staffing crisis at the NWS and restore the agency to full strength. There is no time to waste, because extreme weather events will not stop happening. We do not know when the next disaster will occur and when the NWS will be called upon once again to save lives. It is your personal responsibility to ensure that when that moment arrives, the dedicated employees of the NWS have the staffing and the support they need to succeed in their mission. If you fail, the price our country will pay is too terrible to contemplate.

Pursuant to Rule X of the House of Representatives, the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology “shall review and study on a continuing basis laws, programs, and Government activities relating to nonmilitary research and development.”<sup>19</sup> The Committee possesses jurisdiction over the National Weather Service.<sup>20</sup> If you have any questions regarding this letter, please contact Josh Schneider or Kristi Parrott with the Committee's Minority staff at (202) 225-6375. Thank you for your attention to this vitally important matter.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/02/weather/nws-rehiring-meteorologists>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/05/us/politics/texas-floods-warnings-vacancies.html>.

<sup>19</sup> [119 First Session House Rules](#).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

Sincerely,



Zoe Lofgren  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology



Gabe Amo  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Environment

CC: Chairman Brian Babin  
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Chairman Scott Franklin  
Subcommittee on Environment