

## NOAA

### NWS hampered by 'hiring deficit' — report

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The National Weather Service is losing more employees than it can hire, leading to a "hiring deficit" that has left critical positions unfilled, according to an internal briefing.

**Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER)** circulated the PowerPoint [briefing](#), which was presented to Commerce Deputy Secretary Bruce Andrews in July. It summarizes the "major challenge" of filling vacancies and the agency's progress in restructuring its workforce for modern times.

NWS has struggled to maintain a full workforce since 2013, when Congress implemented sequestration. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration — NWS's parent agency — used a two-year hiring freeze to handle the across-the-board funding cuts.

The July presentation shows an uptick in hires for fiscal 2015 and 2016 but not enough to replace "separations." Between Oct. 1 and July 25 in fiscal 2016, for example, NWS hired 89 employees and lost 144. The deficit stretches back to fiscal 2010, though last year came closest to even, with 194 hires and 205 separations.

NWS spokeswoman Susan Buchanan said the agency has been "working diligently" to speed up hires. It now bundles job openings so it can hire multiple people from one applicant pool, and it has hired Accenture PLC for "processing support."

"We continue our effort to aggressively fill vacancies, but that effort remains challenging because the overall number of separations exceeds our ability to quickly fill vacancies, and security clearances are very slow," she said.

Those challenges come as NWS plans a workforce restructuring that would free up more staff for "impact-based decision support services," where forecasters communicate the impacts of a forecast and work with local emergency managers.

An analysis found that meeting demand for such services would take as much as 1,200 additional full-time employees. Instead, NWS plans to use the existing workforce it has and "unlock" their time, prompting criticism from the National Weather Service Employees Organization (NWSEO) ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 30).

That conflict with the union is reflected in the July presentation: It mentions the recent hiring of a strategic communications expert "to help win [the] messaging battle with NWSEO."

Buchanan confirmed that hire, saying it would help improve the agency's capacity to address the union's "misinformation" and to communicate initiatives to the workforce. She also pointed out that the presentation was outdated and included only ideas about the restructuring. A program management office at NWS will now "demonstrate, test and evaluate" recommendations for the next few years.

But PEER asserted that the PowerPoint shows a "stealth" workforce downsize that will shift the role of local offices away from forecasting

"This is a matter of public safety, not a 'messaging battle,'" said PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch. "Of all things, weather forecasting should be above politics and one of the few areas where even a gridlocked Congress can cooperate — provided that the Congress is informed."

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