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Broadcast Meteorologists Praised at Senate Hearing

Cited for life-saving public service

4/22/2015 11:06:00 AM Eastern



By: John Eggerton
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At a Senate Commerce Committee hearing on weather communications Wednesday, ranking member Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) thanked broadcast meteorologists for their life-saving public service.

Nelson pointed to the "very courageous" Brian Norcross, now with The Weather Channel and formerly meteorologist with WFOR-TV Miami.

Nelson talked about Norcross staying on-air at the station during a hurricane and saving hundreds of lives by doing so.

Testifying at the hearing, "Weathering the Storm: How Can We Better Communicate Weather to Enhance Commerce and Safety?," was Dr. Jay Trobec, chief meteorologist, KELO-TV Sioux Falls. Nelson thanked him for his public service. "Well stated," added Committee chairman John Thune (R-S.D.).

The hearing was focused on how to improve weather information and its dissemination to the public.

Asked by Thune how the government could best help improve weather communications, Trobec said that whatever the government can do to "help us get the forecast right," is the key, which means helping diagnose a weather event soon enough and well enough, then meteorologists can handle getting that information to the public.

Nelson agreed, saying that if the technology is there to accurately forecast, broadcasters can get the word out. He also gave a shout out to retired WJLA Washington, D.C. meteorologist Bob Ryan.

By the same token, Trobec said, if the raw data is wrong, they can't get accurate information out to the public. But he suggested that data is the best around. "The weather warning infrastructure we have here in the United States is the envy of the rest of the world. I think it says something about us that we come together today in an effort to make the world's best even better," he said.

Don Hermev, chief of emergency management, Manatee County, Fla., said that while radio and TV remain important, weather information is now available anywhere, anytime, including on various apps, and suggested it needed to be to reach younger demos where they are, which may be on Snapchat or Pinterest.

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Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) said she had seen the power of local broadcasting and said it was "unbelievable how many lives can be saved when floods and tornadoes threaten."

That said, Thune signaled that he would be introducing legislation to improve weather predictions. "It will focus on improving seasonal predictions so individuals, government, and businesses can make more informed decisions. It will also seek to improve our severe weather warning system, so that additional lives can be saved. This legislation could also improve the 'research to operations; pipeline, create a more effective National Weather Service, and enhance satellite governance," he said.

But while Trobec praised U.S. weather warnings, he says his station uses European computer models rather than U.S. because they have had more powerful weather computers running the models. Trobec praised Congress for allocating more money to NOAA to increase the computing capacity for its weather models. Nelson said he was all for giving the weather service the resources it needs.

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