

Storm brewing over National Weather Service television studio

By Jason Samenow • Capital Weather Gang April 28, 2015



National Hurricane Center director Rick Knabb conducts television interview from in-house studio (AP/Alan Díaz)

Since word has spread that the National Weather Service (NWS) office in Birmingham, Alabama has installed a state-of-the-art television studio, new light is shining on the question: Where do the responsibilities of the National Weather Service start and stop?

Al.com [reported Saturday](#) that the Birmingham NWS office “is putting the finishing touches on its new media center — something that may be the first of its kind.” It contains large-screen monitor, high-end camera and lighting “designed to look as good as a TV studio” according to the Al.com article.

Jim Stefkovich, meteorologist-in-charge of the Birmingham NWS office told The Washington Post in an email that his office spent about \$7,300 on the equipment.

“The purpose of our new system is multi-faceted,” Stefkovich said. “Yes, it is to conduct interviews when requested from media outlets. However, the TV technology allows us to both provide enhanced decision support services to our customers, as well as provide internal operational and external webinars/public training.”

The National Hurricane Center has such a studio in place and has used it for years.

Some private sector and television meteorologists, however, are uncomfortable with this capacity expanding, fearing it’s the first move along a slippery slope towards unfair competition. The concern is that if NWS provides certain broadcast weather services for free, the private sector will lose customers.

“Will they [the NWS] be a replacement for local broadcasters? Probably not,” said Brad Panovich, a broadcast meteorologist in Charlotte, NC. “But it’s always a bit worrisome when a possible competitor has the resources that the government brings to the table [and] starts dabbling in what you do.”

For decades, a debate has raged in the weather community about what that scope of NWS services should be. That is: What are the appropriate activities it should carry out to fulfill its mission of protecting life and property? And what are the activities that are “value-added” and more in the purview of the private sector?

When the National Research Council was commissioned in 2003 to provide guidance on this question, it stopped short. In its report entitled “[Fair Weather: Effective Partnerships in Weather and Climate Services](#)“, it encouraged dialog between the public, private and academic sectors, but concluded: “it is counterproductive and diversionary to establish detailed and rigid boundaries for each sector outlining who can do what and with which tools.”

Although it’s not etched in stone, historically the weather community has operated in the following manner: the NWS develops and issues forecast, warnings and supporting services and the private sector “adds value” by, for example, developing innovative tools and visuals for displaying and communicating the information to targeted customers.

But the goal posts for defining what’s a “mission-critical” NWS service and a “value-added” activity in the private sector’s turf remain ill-defined.

Barry Myers, the CEO of AccuWeather, which has long held a narrow interpretation of the NWS mission with respect to the services it should provide, said activities that would be conducted within the NWS Birmingham television studio are part of the “secondary value chain” and “not an NWS activity.”

“[D]uplicating facilities local and national weather television presenters already have is not where we would hope money is being invested when we are talking about having inadequate funding for the needed core infrastructure for computers and creating and instituting computer models that are the best in the world, instead of relying on European and other models to predict America’s weather,” Myers said.

Jay Trobec, a broadcast meteorologist in South Dakota who [testified before the Senate Commerce Committee](#) last week about effective weather communication, expressed the view NWS may be crossing a line – not only with the television studio installment in Birmingham but also recent forays into other new platforms and technologies for conveying weather information.

“It does appear there is some “mission creep” going on,” Trobec said in an email. “Rather than simply doing the science of forecasting and issuing warnings, NWS offices are spending time and money creating TV-like graphics and webcasts, having their meteorologists Tweet and Facebook (even on quiet days), and developing mobile-friendly websites to distribute weather directly to the public.”

But some broadcast meteorologists say they support the NWS initiative.

“I don’t have any problem with it,” said James Spann, chief meteorologist at the ABC affiliate in Birmingham. “This just gives the local NWS office an easy way to make appearances on local TV stations during active weather, and also gives

them a chance to produce video products directly to the public.”

“I’m surprised that some in the broadcast sector have been opposed,” added Kevin Selle, a broadcast meteorologist who runs the [Digital Meteorologist Web site](#). “Some of the comments I’ve seen feel like old model protectionist thinking, and that is not the way of the web. Those who are trying to keep NWS in the same old box need to relax and realize times are changing. Their mission, as I see it, is to protect life and property and I would be pulling at every distribution thread to justify and execute that mission.”

When asked about the concern about NWS “competing” with broadcast meteorologists with its new studio, NWS Birmingham’s Stefkovich countered his objective is the opposite. “Our office works with not against those within the weather community in our region,” Stefkovich said.


He added: “As I sit here both reliving and discussing the horrible tragedy that occurred in AL four years ago today, where over 250 folks died statewide, I am motivated to do everything that I can to help prevent a similar tragedy in the future. Our office will accomplish this by providing the best decision support services to our customers and helping residents become both educated and resilient to future hazardous weather events. To this end, I believe this lines up with our agency’s goal of a Weather-Ready Nation.”

[\[After the storm: Surviving the April 2011 Tuscaloosa tornado disaster\]](#)

The [National Weather Service Employees Organization](#) (NWSEO), a labor union, thinks the experiment in Birmingham should be nationalized – with cameras at every NWS office. “Having these pool cameras would help the TV stations and NWS, a win-win,” said Dan Sobien, NWSEO president. “[T]hese pool cameras would create first class briefing stations for emergency managers and first responders when needed.”

“NWSEO believes that the NWS should be the face of dissemination,” added Richard Hirn, counsel for the NWSEO. “That the public should have direct access to us; that they should know where the warnings and forecasts are coming from; and while the private sector can add value to NWS products, the capacity of the private sector should never be a basis for the NWS to decline to directly communicate with the public.”

 **21 Comments**

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Record Most

67 (1980,2010)

Record Fewest

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Last Year

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	National	Dulles	BWI
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Avg. Low	46	39	40
Rec. High	80 (1902)	77 (1963)	77 (1931)
Rec. Low	31 (1937)	27 (1969)	28 (1962)
Sunrise	7:28 am	7:29 am	7:27 am
Sunset	6:16 pm	6:17 pm	6:14 pm
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