

FEDERAL COMMITTEE FOR METEOROLOGICAL SERVICES AND
SUPPORTING RESEARCH (FCMSSR)

NEXRAD PROGRAM COUNCIL (NPC)

Office of the Federal Coordinator for Meteorology (OFCM)
1325 East-West Highway, Suite 7130
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Record of Actions 2016-1 Meeting
July 5, 2016

ATTENDEES

Members

DOC: Dr. Louis Uccellini NOAA/NWS
DoD: Mr. Ralph Stoffler, HQ USAF/A3W
DOT: Mr. Malcolm Andrews, FAA
OFCM: Dr. William Schulz (Chairman)

Other Participants

DOC: Mr. Joseph Pica, NOAA/NWS
DoD: Mr. John Vogel, HQ USAF/A3W
DOT: Mr. Steven Kim, FAA
OFCM: Mr. Jud Stailey (Executive Secretary)

[Background. The NEXRAD Program Council (NPC) last met in 1996 and was “retired’ in 1997 with the understanding that it could be “reassembled under extenuating circumstance.” NPC responsibilities were delegated to the NEXRAD Program Management Committee (PMC). In an October 8, 2015 letter, Mr. Stoffler stated that he was recommending that the Air Force transfer U.S.-based NEXRAD system to NWS. Replying in October 29, 2015, Dr. Uccellini posed several questions regarding the proposed transfer, to which Mr. Stoffler replied on March 15, 2016. On May 18, 2016, Dr. Uccellini responded to the original recommendation, stating that NWS does not support the proposed transfer and requesting that OFCM convene an NPC to discuss the issue.]

1. OPENING REMARKS

Dr. Bill Schulz, Federal Coordinator for Meteorology and NPC Chairman, opened the meeting with introductions and welcomed the participants. He stated that this somewhat historic event was discuss the disposition of the DoD WSR-88D radar systems in a tri-agency forum.

2. DISCUSSION

Mr. Stoffler reiterated the basic rationale behind the DoD proposal. Twenty-one of the 22 US-based DoD radars are now operated by NOAA per an earlier agreement, and NWS has expressed concerns that these radars are not being maintained to standard. Transferring these radars (with the funding in the budget line) would allow NWS to bring maintenance on these radars up to standard. Regarding four overseas radars on foreign territory, the DoD intent is to shut these radars down and return them to NWS. One could be returned this FY and two could be returned next year.

Dr. Uccellini responded that there were several aspects to maintaining radar capability that were not covered in the DoD proposal, including the status of the Radar Operations Center (ROC). However, he was concerned by DoD's need for the data, which Mr. Stoffler confirmed, stating that they viewed radar data like GOES satellite data, something that is provided by NOAA. Mr. Stoffler also stated that there is no appetite in DoD for participation in a CONUS weather radar replacement program, and that a transfer of NEXRAD assets to NWS would lay the track for a future arrangement that would not include DoD. Mr. Stoffler expressed a concern about the Spectrum Efficient National Surveillance Radar (SENSR) and the potential that the air surveillance community could leave weather behind in their pursuit of spectrum reallocation funding.

Mr. Pica detailed some of the NWS costs of assuming responsibility for the DoD systems that were not included in the proposal, including staffing the ROC, travel to current DoD radars for maintenance, and completion of the SLEP. Mr. Stoffler responded that SLEP is fully funded and would be supported. Maintenance is an issue because the DoD doesn't have maintenance dedicated solely to the WSR-88D at all sites, so transferring maintenance funding at those locations would be problematic. Capital cost of the systems also came up. Mr. Stoffler stated that the capital cost has been a show-stopper in the past, but has recently been assured by DoD people who consult with OMB that the capital cost is not expected to be an issue. If that should change, a transfer of radars would not be possible. Mr. Pica suggested that recent investments in the WSR-88D (dual pol and the SLEP) could affect the decision on capital costs.

Mr. Andrews asked if the DoD radars were transferred, would the cost of the ROC become a 50-50 split between NWS and FAA. Dr. Uccellini responded that there are already issues related to the ROC. Concern has been expressed about the vacant DoD positions at the ROC and how ROC resources would be handled in a transfer. He went on to suggest that there needs to be a review of ROC resources, but that should be between all three agencies. Mr. Andrews pointed out that while the operations costs are based on number of radars, the ROC costs are split evenly, which would significantly increase FAA's costs in the absence of a third partner. Mr. Stoffler explained that the status of filling the vacant remaining positions* at the ROC has been tied up in the proposal to transfer the radars. He pledged, based on discussions at this meeting, to move forward with filling the positions.

To bring FAA up to speed on NWS thinking, Dr. Uccellini pointed out that NWS didn't simply say no to the DoD proposal, but expressed the concern that the transfer would present

an “unfunded mandate” because there would be aspects of NWS cost that would not be covered by DoD. One could understand the DoD approach to withdraw from some programs to focus more on specific mission requirements in a budget-constrained environment, but this is a very important program to the nation that requires care in making decisions about its future. Moving forward with a transfer would require that NWS receive the necessary funding to fully support the program, and it’s important that a transfer not be driven by an arbitrary decision. Mr. Stoffler agreed with that concern.

Mr. Stoffler pointed out that when the transfer issue first arose, he asked NWS if all the DoD radars were needed where they were, and NWS responded that they were. With that in mind, he said that he expected that regardless of their status, they would not be moved. This led to a discussion about appropriations law, bona fide needs of other agencies, etc. Dr. Uccellini emphasized that there are advantages in the current arrangement because it involves long-term agreements that have worked effectively, and there would be challenging budgetary and policy subtleties in crafting a new arrangement. He also pointed out there has been and continues to be a lot of cooperation on the NEXRAD program, highlighting, for example, the importance of the return of the Lajes radar in supporting the SLEP.

In the context of the SLEP, which extends the life of the current system and, without a transfer of assets, the liability of the DoD to continue to support the WSR-88D, Mr. Stoffler asked about the plan for the next generation of radars. Will “ Multi-Function Phased Array (MPAR)” become a reality? Dr. Uccellini replied that the SLEP will extend the life of the WSR-88Ds into the 2030s, and expressed doubts about the ability of new technologies to meet NWS needs.

Mr. Stoffler pointed out that the manpower study that determined that the ROC required 132 people was completed in the early 2000s, and suggested that given the maturity of the system a reassessment might be in order.

Mr. Andrews returned to the issue of the next generation radar. He pointed out that NPOESS as an interagency effort did not work out, and we should emulate the NEXRAD program as we move forward. We should be thinking now about how to successfully structure the MPAR/SENSR program for success. Mr. Stoffler expressed concern that DoD involvement in SENSR could complicate funding for the WSR-88D if the mission of that radar is not included in SENSR. Mr. Andrews went on to suggest that the agencies consider various NEXRAD options going forward with the interagency agreement (including the MOU, which conceptually hasn’t changed in a long time). The options could be assessed in the context of business cases. The primary options would be status quo and transfer of DoD assets. Mr. Stoffler stated that he has no problem with either option, but the options need to be addressed in the context of the future, including what happens with the next generation system.

Mr. Stoffler suggested that we go forward with the ROC study, which would be a joint effort, and he would move out on getting the vacant DoD positions at the ROC filled. Mr. Pica agreed to lead the study. Dr. Schulz asked who the audience for the study would be, suggesting perhaps OMB. Dr. Uccellini suggested that we complete the work in house first before deciding where it should go forward.

Dr. Uccellini emphasized the importance of radar as indicated by objective studies looking at the importance of the spectrum of observing systems. While open to responding to case studies that show the benefit of other organizational options, he stated that at this point the tri-agency arrangement is a success story and should be maintained unless and until some other arrangement is shown to be clearly advantageous.

*This refers to the Deputy Director position and 3 staff positions. – wjs, Chair

ACTION ITEMS:

Action Item 2016-1.1. DoD will fill the vacant DoD positions at the ROC.
Due Date: September 1, 2017

Action Item 2016-1.2. National Weather Service, supported by DoD and FAA will lead a review of current and future ROC manpower requirements.
Due Date: July 1, 2017

Action Item 2016-1.3. OFCM will propose an approach to performing business case analyses on NEXRAD scenarios going forward. Analyses should include, as a minimum, status quo and complete transfer of DoD assets, but other scenarios may be proposed.
Due Date: October 31, 2016