

**Testimony to the Subcommittee on Disaster Prevention and Prediction  
of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation  
of the United States Senate**

**June 29, 2005**

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I have come here today to discuss two topics which are important to those of us who live in the Midwest and both topics are related to severe weather. The first topic I will discuss is our severe weather warning system and the second topic concerns our weather forecasters.

On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004 southern Lancaster County, along with 5 other counties, fell victim to a tornado that was on the ground for 54 miles, had a damage path at its widest point of 2 ½ miles, and an F4 rating on the Fujita scale. One death was reported and a total of 37 injuries were reported as this storm decimated the Village of Hallam.

The National Weather Service in Valley, Nebraska, along with local broadcasters, provided the citizens of southern Lancaster County and surrounding counties with a minute by minute forecast of the tornado's path and projected future movements. Without these warnings, there is no doubt in my mind that the number of deaths and/or injuries would have been much greater.

Lancaster, Saline and Gage Counties were affected by this particular storm and are the only 3 counties in the State of Nebraska, on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004 to have been certified by NOAA as "Storm Ready" counties. Since last spring the Weather Service in Valley has initiated a conference call program for all Emergency Managers and media representatives in their coverage area. The purpose of this conference call is to provide information about the possibility of severe weather on any given date. During a recent NCAA regional baseball tournament in Lincoln (where over 4500 people were seated), this advance information was extremely helpful in preparing for the possibility of tornadic activity in the area of Lincoln. Within 10 minutes of the first pitch of the evening game, Lincoln and Lancaster County were placed in a tornado "warning". Advance precautionary information provided to us allowed for a timely response to this "warning".

One suggestion I would like to make with regard to watches and warnings is to provide for three (3) phases of weather warnings rather than the two (2) which are currently being used. An example of a three-tiered system would be a tornado "watch", tornado "alert", and a tornado "warning". Currently, a "watch" and a "warning" are used. The addition of the "alert" would indicate a radar image of a tornado vortex signature. Then a tornado "warning" would be issued when a tornado is confirmed. This would be very similar to a signal light with the green, yellow and red. I feel that often when a "warning" is issued and nothing happens, the general public begins to question the validity of the "warning". Adding the additional "alert" advisory would allow for the seriousness of the "warning" to have significant impact.

Several years ago Lincoln and Omaha's weather services were combined and placed in Valley, Nebraska. All Emergency Managers would like to have a weather service in their own backyard and we all understand that is not practical. However, the service area for each weather service site has been increased dramatically. The service area for the Valley Weather Service consists of 30 counties in eastern Nebraska and 8 counties in western Iowa. This service area extends from the Nebraska/South Dakota boundary on the

north to the Nebraska/Kansas boundary on the south. With the consolidation of facilities and the increase of service area size, an additional burden has been placed on those forecasters tasked with warning over half of the State of Nebraska's total population.

Lancaster County alone consists of 864 square miles that had become extremely urbanized, with a large portion of the population moving into a rural-type settings. With a population of over 246,000, Lancaster County is over 55 miles from our weather service provider in Valley, Nebraska. Sometimes bigger is better, but not necessarily when dealing with public safety issues. Consolidation of facilities, when dealing with weather issues, is not the solution that provides the best service for those living in areas affected by severe weather.

Since Sept.11, 2001 Homeland Security has invested millions of dollars to prevent acts of terrorism. Does "Mother Nature" meet the definition of a terrorist? I think so.

In conclusion, I have come here today to ask that you consider two issues. The first one is that you consider adding a third tier to the warning system used for severe weather. The second issue is that you reconsider the size of the service areas that the National Weather Service forecasters have to work with. Our lives depend on the accuracy of the weather forecasts and our warning system.

Thank you.

