

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <https://commerce.senate.gov>

LILA HARPER HELMS, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
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February 12, 2024

Dr. Richard W. Spinrad
Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW, Room 5128
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Dr. Spinrad:

I write to express my concern regarding the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) recent steps to decommission 113 soil moisture sensors. Soil moisture measurements are essential for agricultural monitoring and accurate forecasts of drought and other hazards like flooding and wildfire. It is my understanding that after my office contacted NOAA expressing concern about this decommissioning, NOAA delayed taking action through this fiscal year. However, since the decommissioning is still under consideration, I strongly encourage you to commit to keeping these soil moisture sensors in service.

More than 248,000 farms and ranches in Texas rely on these forecasts to manage crops and livestock. Decommissioning these sensors would hurt farmers not just in Texas, but across the entire United States, especially in states that rely exclusively on NOAA's network, such as Louisiana, Florida, Virginia, Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.

The 2018 reauthorization of the National Integrated Drought Information System required NOAA to develop a strategy for monitoring the nation's soil moisture. The resulting *Strategy for the National Coordinated Soil Moisture Monitoring Network* specifically calls for "a strategic and coordinated increase of in situ moisture monitoring stations across the United States."¹ NOAA's short-sighted proposal to decommission these sensors does the exact opposite.

It is important for Congress to understand the decision-making process that led to the decommissioning proposal. The Standing Rules of the Senate provide the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation the authority to "review and study" atmospheric services "on a continuing basis" and jurisdiction over NOAA.² Therefore, please provide written responses to the questions below no later than February 26, 2024.

¹ Executive Committee of the National Coordinated Soil Moisture Monitoring Network., 2021. A Strategy for the National Coordinated Soil Moisture Monitoring Network, at <https://www.drought.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/NCSMMN-Strategy-Final-May-2021.pdf>

² S. Rules XXV(1)(f), XXVI(8)(a)(2).

1. How was this decommissioning proposal informed by the Strategy for the National Coordinated Soil Moisture Monitoring Network, if at all?
2. What is the status of NOAA's implementation of the Strategy for the National Coordinated Soil Moisture Monitoring Network?
3. How was stakeholder input incorporated into the decision-making (including which stakeholders were engaged for feedback)?
4. What are the impacts to weather and drought forecasting, at the state and federal level, with the loss of the soil moisture data from the reference network, including the accuracy of products and services that previously incorporated the data from these sensors?
5. What funding is required to use and maintain these sensors annually? Please include a detailed breakdown.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ted Cruz
Ranking Member