

Questions for the Record
Nomination Hearing for Dr. Mark E. Schaefer to be
Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
July 24, 2013

Senator Thune

1) Timely communication with Congress

Questions for the record – like this one – are an important way for our Committee Members to more deeply understand the positions of the Departments and agencies over which we have jurisdiction. We hope that those Departments and agencies view the responses to those questions as an opportunity to further educate Members about their challenges and views.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has not been as responsive to this Committee as many of us expect. In the 112th Congress, there was one instance in which NOAA failed to provide answers to questions for the record; ten months after the questions were submitted to the agency, the hearing record was closed and the following acknowledgement was printed in the hearing record: “Although Committee Members submitted written Questions for the Record to Dr. Jane Lubchenco following the March 7, 2012, hearing, NOAA did not provide responses to the Committee before the hearing record was closed on January 25, 2013.” This Congress, we are still awaiting answers to questions for the record sent on April 3, 2013, following a March 19 fisheries hearing.

In addition, some of my fellow Senators have written to the agency to inquire about the status of issues important to their states and have not received timely responses. For example, my colleagues from Georgia wrote to the agency in April to seek an update on the status of a permit application; they have not yet received an answer.

If you are confirmed to be Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, will you do your best to ensure that communications between NOAA and our Committee and its Members are timely and accurate? In particular, I would appreciate responses to substantive questions for the record within no more than three months; in cases where official responses on that timeline are impossible, I would appreciate the agency to communicate the reason for the delay to the Committee.

ANSWER: I know communication with Congress is an important function for the position for which I am nominated. If confirmed, I will absolutely do my best to ensure communications between NOAA and the Committee are timely and accurate. If we are not able to meet certain deadlines, I will commit to communicating clearly with the Committee as to why.

2) NOAA Reorganization

In 2008, you were lead author on a paper, “An Earth Systems Science Agency,” published in *Science*. In this article, you and your coauthors advocate for the establishment of an “independent Earth Systems Science Agency formed by merging the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).” Do you still think that realigning federal earth systems science agencies, including NOAA, would best position the U.S. to address future environmental challenges? Further, if such a reorganization were to take place, what would be the fate of the fisheries functions of NOAA, for example the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), taking into account studies such as the Government Accountability Office’s 2013 “Potential Benefits and Drawbacks of Merging the National Marine Fisheries Service into the Fish and Wildlife Service” (GAO-13-248)?

ANSWER: I and several colleagues wrote that paper a number of years ago strictly from the viewpoint of an optional approach to aligning earth science activities. I am fully aware of how much time and effort goes into any type of reorganization, especially if it is done correctly. If confirmed, I will focus on ensuring NOAA's expertise continues to support vibrant coastal economies and complements the work of other federal agencies.

3) Question: Should you be confirmed, how would you ensure that NOAA’s employees are encouraged to express concerns about financial or other mismanagement issues at the agency, and that those concerns are taken seriously and investigated in a timely manner by the appropriate members of NOAA’s management team?

ANSWER: If I am confirmed, I will work with the Commerce and NOAA General Counsel's offices to be sure that NOAA employees in the offices I oversee are aware of their rights and responsibilities with respect to financial and other management matters, including the procedures for properly reporting concerns about possible waste, fraud, abuse, or other concerns. I will also ensure that managers are informed of the procedures for addressing these concerns in a timely manner, including when it is appropriate to notify others in the department or elsewhere of reported issues.