



U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, & TRANSPORTATION

Chair Maria Cantwell
Nominations Hearing
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
June 8, 2022

VIDEO

OPENING STATEMENT

Good Morning. The U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation will come to order. This morning, we are reviewing the nominations of three individuals: Ms. Robin Hutcherson of Utah to be the Administrator of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration; Mr. Michael Morgan of Wisconsin to be Assistant Secretary of Commerce; Mr. Sean Burton of California to be a member of the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority.

So welcome to all of the nominees and to your families. Thank you for your willingness to serve.

First, we will consider the nomination of Dr. Michael Morgan to be Assistant Secretary for Environmental Observation and Prediction. Welcome to you and your family.

The highest priority for this position is to accelerate improvements to the precision and accuracy of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's weather and climate forecasting.

I guarantee you, this is a big priority to both myself and the Ranking Member.

We both have pushed NOAA and legislation to make sure that we are a weather-ready nation.

As our nation grapples with the impacts of climate [change], improving NOAA's forecasting is crucial to protecting lives, protecting property, and to keeping our economy moving.

You will play a significant role. Dr. Morgan is a professor in the Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and serves as associate chair of the department's undergraduate program.

Dr. Morgan has been a leader in the American Meteorological Society (AMS) as its community. And he has served as a member of the Board on Women and Minorities, the Scientific and Technological Activities Commission for Atmospheric and Oceanic Fluid Dynamics, and as an AMS Councilor. He also spent part of his career at the National Science Foundation, serving as Division Director for the Division of Atmospheric and Geospace Sciences.

Weather impacts all aspects of our economy. Improving our forecast model means that: People can move goods and services more safely and efficiently; Farmers can maximize harvests – in the midst of drought conditions; and communities can better prepare for the mitigate for natural disasters.

In 2021, there were 20 separate billion-dollar weather and climate disasters across the United States. At the same time, recent studies say that sectors such as agriculture, energy, transportation, and their disaster risk management can benefit by over \$160 billion from upgrades in weather forecasting capabilities and other technology.

I'm sure we'll get into this in the questions, but it's about preparing and obviously knowing what's happening, what's going to be coming down the road and being better prepared for it. And obviously having resources to better respond once you've identified what the impacts are going to be.

But Dr. Morgan will be charged with leading our nation's resiliency to extreme weather and realizing the economic benefits from improved forecasting.

Next, we will consider the nomination of Robin Hutcheson to be the Administrator of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

Ms. Hutcheson knows the agency's mission well. She currently serves as Deputy Administrator and previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Safety Policy at DOT.

In addition, she brings tremendous on-the-ground experiences, having served as the Director of Public Works for the City of Minneapolis and the Transportation Director for Salt Lake City, Utah.

Strong federal leadership is needed as the nation faces a tragic rise in the highway fatalities, including a dramatic increase in fatal crashes involving large trucks.

In 2021, 5,600 people lost their lives in accidents involving large trucks, a 13 percent increase from the year before.

In the state of Washington, 94 people died in crashes involving heavy trucks last year, up 25 percent from the year before, and doubled the number of fatalities a decade ago. So we have lots of work to do. Those are unacceptable increases.

If confirmed, Ms. Hutcheson will be responsible for confronting these crisis on the roads, and for ensuring our safety.

I believe her executive experience heading the public sector transportation agencies will provide critical leadership and skills needed to address this issues.

And Finally, Mr. Sean Burton to serve on the board of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, which operates Dulles and Reagan National airports. Trust me, all the members of this Committee care about these issues. And probably have very specific questions for you.

Many of us here are frequent flyers in and out of these airports. We share a responsibility to ensure federal funds are spent efficiently and effectively.

Mr. Burton currently sits on the Los Angeles Board of Airport Commissioners and previously served as its President. He is an attorney and CEO of a real estate firm. Mr. Burton is also no stranger to public service, having served in the Defense Intelligence Agency, as the Navy Reserve's Commander of the Third Fleet, and in the Clinton Administration.

His experience, particularly on LA Board of Airport Commissioners, will give him an important perspective on many of the important issues facing the organization.

For instance, at Reagan National Airport -- like JFK and LaGuardia -- the number of hourly flights is capped through FAA "slot controls."

In addition, National Airport has what is called a "Perimeter Rule" which prohibits the destinations more than 1,250 miles away, although Congress created exemptions that allow 20 daily round trips beyond the perimeter. Those are some of the issues and challenges that I'm sure we are going to discuss with you.

Question and Answer

Nominees:

Ms. Robin Hutcheson to be Administrator of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration

Dr. Michael Morgan to be Assistant Secretary for Environmental Observation and Prediction, Department of Commerce

Mr. Sean Burton to be a Member of the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority

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[VIDEO](#)

Senator Cantwell: Well, let me start with you, Dr. Morgan, I really appreciated your mentioning of scientific integrity and I can't tell you how important that is. I learned a lot more about weather forecasting after we tried to update a Doppler System out on our coast and people didn't think we needed to and then we had a hurricane wind event that cost us loss of life and damage no one saw coming and people said, yes, we need to update our system. It taught me that we can do so much more with this science today.

Do you think supercomputing is the linchpin behind the forecasting models? Do we in the United States, we gave some money in the infrastructure bill, the bipartisan bill, to invest in supercomputing power for our weather models. I know everybody always talks about the UK model. Europe, you know, you hear this on the news all the time, well, the European model because they do invest in supercomputing a little more than we do. So do you see this as a linchpin?

Dr. Morgan: Thank you for the question. Yes, I think high performance computing is going to be essential for the United States to maintain its leadership in global weather prediction. Our global models like NOAA's global forecast system model, is a competitor's model with the European and UKMET models. In the last hurricane season, I believe its track performance outperformed that of these other models in terms of global models in this realm.

In addition to the high performance computing, there's going to be a need as well, to train researchers and model developers in the development of our new models, the next generation of models, in order for them to make the most effective use of the computing that's available. As a member of the research community, I am delighted to see the investment in the bipartisan infrastructure bill that provided \$80 million to NOAA for this purpose.

Senator Cantwell: Do you think we need to do more?

Dr. Morgan: Yes definitely, we can be doing more in computing and we're going to need to do that in order for our models to be able to continue to increase in their granularity, their resolution, and their timeliness for providing forecast.

Senator Cantwell: Well, I'll let Senator Wicker speak for himself, but I know whether you're talking about tornadoes in the Midwest, or you're talking about our ability for our maritime community to have accurate information. All of these issues play such an important role and for us lately it's always about rain, but it's what people now call "atmospheric rivers of rain" dumping on soil at intense periods of time.

Obviously, we had the Oso experience, it's not really even a landslide as much as it was an explosion after four inches of rain I think that that morning. So we need to know a lot more about this, the changes and so appreciate you saying that.

Ms. Hutcheson, on those safety statistics I mentioned, what do you think should be the number one priority and driving down those statistics?

Ms. Hutcheson: Senator, thank you so much for the question. The national roadway safety strategy outlines a number of actions that the DOT should take for commercial motor vehicles. There are a few priorities. One, increasing investigations on high risk carriers. Two, making sure we're quickly getting the resources of the bipartisan infrastructure law into the partners into their hands very quickly for their use, and three is closing loopholes so that unsafe drivers are never on the road.

Senator Cantwell: Do you have some analysis of these crashes and fatalities? Do you have some analysis of it? Do you think it is a specific carrier or something of under training, or...?

Ms. Hutcheson: Senator, thank you for that question. We have analysis on the causes of crashes. However, we are conducting a more in depth analysis now on a large crash causal factors study, which will give us even more information so that we can target our resources in the very best way possible.

Senator Cantwell: Well, look, I'm going to ask you some follow up questions for the record or maybe later in this hearing on that point. Mr. Burton, I appreciate your statement about how airports are the economic development tool for a region and we certainly see that here within this region. So the integration of those transportation resources at Dulles for the region are very important. So obviously, DCA has a lot of construction work going on right now and so I guess the question is, how do you communicate those priorities about what we need to do to upgrade the infrastructure so that the region has more, let's say easy your travel... easier travel experiences?

Mr. Burton: Thank you for the question. The bipartisan infrastructure bill is going to be helpful. I was meeting with the MWAA staff earlier this week and looking at the plans, not just at national, but also at Dulles, very significant plans to build a new terminal and fix the ingress and egress.

You do have the...one of the biggest complaints about airports is getting to airports and you do have the Silver Line construction, which has been finished it will run out to Dulles and they're testing the train so It's supposed to be operational by the end of the year.

But I think that needs to be a major priority for the board. It has been for us at LAX. Again, we've spent almost \$15 billion upgrading airport facilities at LAX to try to create a better passenger experience. In this country, we generally have underfunded airports for the last few decades and I think there's a recognition now that needs to be a major priority. So I look forward to bringing that experience and working with MWWA on that.

Senator Cantwell: Thank you.