

# **The Transfer of National Weather Service (NWS) Agricultural Weather Services and NWS Non-Federal Non-Wildfire Weather Services to the Private Meteorological Sector:**

## **A Report to Congress Executive Summary**

**April 30, 1996**

---

### **Summary**

In accordance with the Administration's FY 1996 Proposed Budget and the Administration's Reinventing Government initiatives issued in early 1995, the National Weather Service (NWS) initiated a transition program to transfer NWS Agricultural Weather Services and non-federal non-wildfire weather support to private meteorological firms willing to assume these responsibilities.

The Conference Report to the Commerce Appropriations bill stated the intent of Congress that :

"While the conference agreement assumes the privatization of specialized weather services, the conferees recognized that it may be necessary within the funds available, for the National Weather Service to continue to provide agricultural weather, fruit frost, and fire related services for a limited time in areas where private sector entities are not yet available to provide these services. The conferees expect NOAA to submit a report by April 30, 1996 on the status of these privatization proposals. The conferees expect NWS to continue the marine facsimile weather service program within funds provided under local warnings and forecasts."

Specific NWS fruit frost weather services continue through April 20, 1996 in frost-prone areas. The U.S. Coast Guard has assumed costs for transmission of maps for the marine facsimile weather services program after determining that this service was critical for the safety of its vessels. Non-Federal non-wildfire weather support was discontinued October 1, 1995. The NWS continues fire weather support to all federal agencies as well as meteorological support for all aspects of wildfire suppression in support of its mission to protect lives and property.

This Executive Summary details the steps taken by the NWS to transfer these specialized weather services to the private meteorological sector. There is special emphasis on the continuing NWS efforts to create a successful privatization of Agricultural Weather Services and non-federal non-wildfire weather services within the framework of the current NWS public-private partnership.

---

### **Background**

The U.S. Congress established the Weather Bureau (predecessor to the National Weather Service) in 1890 as an agency of the Department of Agriculture for its first fifty years to provide weather information to the nation's farming community.

Since World War II advances in weather forecasting accuracy combined with parallel advances in the science and technology of agribusiness supported crop and livestock yields in the United States that are the envy of the world.

Also since World War II, the private meteorological sector has grown into a thriving service industry with estimated annual revenues of \$200 million dollars. Over 300 private firms exist today to support agribusiness with tailored weather services and climate data. Within the framework of a successful public-private partnership, the NWS provides the private sector with all its basic weather data, computer models, satellite and radar imagery at the cost of dissemination. The private meteorological sector adds value to this wealth of information and efficiently distributes not only its specialized products, but also the NWS weather warnings and forecasts to the public as well as the agribusiness community.

### **Privatization Chronology**

In response to the Administration's FY 1995 budget proposal, the NWS began the development of a detailed transition plan for the transfer of specialized services to the private meteorological sector during the spring of 1995. The cornerstones of the transition plan included a letter to each congressman, a July 5, 1995 Federal Register Notice, an NWS field office transition plan, extensive Q and A sheets for our field office personnel, and a letter to agricultural weather users on the transition program.

In order to transition agricultural weather services most effectively by matching private agricultural weather providers with agricultural weather users, the National Weather Service compiled a Directory of U.S. Private Weather Services and a Directory of Users of National Weather Service Agricultural and Fire Weather Services. Over 3,000 of these Directories have been distributed nationwide through NWS headquarters and field offices. Meanwhile, the NWS Office of Industrial Meteorology has maintained an updated database of private weather providers on its Internet home page at the following address <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/im/>.

From the summer of 1995 through April 1996, the NWS made a concerted effort to alert the agricultural community of the impending transition through broadcasts on NOAA Weather Radio and notices on the NOAA Weather Wire Service. A final Federal Register titled National Weather Service to Discontinue the Issuance of All Routine Agricultural Forecasts and Fruit Frost Forecasts was published on March 4, 1996.

### **Coordination with Private Meteorological Firms**

The NWS met and corresponded with the private meteorological community integral to the privatization efforts.

### **Coordination with The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)**

The USDA has a wide variety of meteorological needs and has worked cooperatively with the NWS over the years to maintain reliable and accurate data for timely decisions by the federal government regarding markets for commodities and assistance during droughts, floods and freezes. USDA's three primary concerns are:

1. "that station data networks that have evolved over many decades be preserved..."
2. "that data archives must be maintained...."
3. "that an efficient delivery system be maintained which allows all users, from federal policymakers to the agribusiness community to the local farmer, direct access to agricultural weather and climate data and products."

Point 1] is addressed in the next section. The National Climate Data Center as well as NOAA Regional Climate Data Centers already serve as data archives (point 2]).

NOAA Weather Wire, NOAA Weather Radio, NWS Family of Services, and the NOAA Regional Climate Centers represent efficient means of delivery of NWS data, warnings and forecasts (Point 3]). Moreover most all NWS products can be found on the [NWS Internet Home Page \(http://www.nws.noaa.gov/\)](http://www.nws.noaa.gov/).

### **NWS Maintenance of Agricultural Weather Observations**

NWS has worked assiduously to ensure that no weather observations used for agricultural forecasting or for climatological data bases cease with the closure of four Agricultural Weather Service Centers located at Stoneville, Miss., College Station, Tx., Lafayette, In., and Auburn, Ala. Along with the Department of Agriculture, the NWS and the private meteorological sector depend on these observations to make accurate forecasts.

The first step in this effort has been a complete inventory of Agricultural Weather Observations. A subsequent review of this inventory is now being used to identify which, if any, observation sites are "at risk" of being lost.

Another challenge will be the maintenance of seasonal observations for fruit frost forecasting which were manually collected by NWS agricultural meteorologists who have been reassigned as part of the transition. Working with grower groups, the NWS is making every effort to ensure that these critical data will continue to be available during the frost season.

### **Further NWS Support to the Private Sector and Agricultural Community**

NWS field offices will continue to provide basic weather forecast information that are beneficial such as frost and freeze warnings and advisories.

Agricultural forecasting studies and software developed at the local level are now available to the private sector through the IM home page on the Internet.

---

### **Conclusion**

The transition of agricultural weather services to the private sector is dynamic. Both the NWS and the private meteorological sector will need to continue to work together to provide maximum service to the nation's growers. Privatization efforts are not new to the NWS. Over the years, the NWS has transferred services such as direct commercial radio and television broadcasts, newspaper weather page preparation, and weather by phone successfully to the private sector.

The NWS is committed to the public-private partnership and a realization of the potential benefits from the privatization of agricultural weather services.

The National Weather Service Office of Industrial Meteorology, Suite 18100, 1325 East West Highway, Silver Spring, Md. 20910 can provide any additional information required on the privatization process.