National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Evolving the National Weather Service

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evolving the National Weather Service (NWS) is a significant and multifaceted organizational effort, launched in response to Congressionally-mandated studies by the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Public Administration. This initiative, or "Evolve" as it is commonly called, is a multiyear effort to transform the NWS into a streamlined, technologically advanced organization with increased operational and workforce capacities. This will ultimately contribute to building a Weather-Ready Nation, with improved weather products and services and the ultimate goal of ensuring our nation is more prepared and resilient to high-impact weather events. The Evolve initiative capitalizes on emerging technologies, increases capacity within its workforce, and produces more accurate, consistent, understandable products and actionable information for its customers. Technological improvements include upgrades to NWS operational models and implementing a "National Blend of Models" that produces a more uniform and consistent forecast nationwide.

While some aspects of the Evolve initiative include improvements to NWS' technology and infrastructure, many of the most transformative goals involve changes to the NWS workforce. The ongoing Operations and Workforce Analysis (OWA) is an organizational change management assessment that is examining nearly every aspect of NWS's operations, from staffing models and workforce engagement to customer interaction and service delivery. The findings of this analysis will chart the necessary evolution of the organizational structure and workforce capabilities, resulting in improvements to weather services for users.

In order to make the NWS labor management relationship at NWS up-to-date with current labor law and practices, it is necessary to negotiate and ratify a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) with the NWS union, the National Weather Service Employees Organization (NWSEO). This is often a lengthy process, and while negotiations are conducted, provisions of the old agreement remain in effect As a result, proposed changes will not be realized until the collective bargaining process has concluded. The NWS CBA team has retained expert staff to manage the negotiations and strategic communications processes.

As the Evolve initiative transitions to the next administration, close coordination and consistent support between NWS, the Department of Commerce, and White House is necessary in order to achieve success.

BACKGROUND

Key Challenges to Date

Prior to the Evolve initiative, NWS went through a similar organizational change effort called the Modernization of NWS in the 1990s, and it encountered challenges from its workforce, including its labor union National Weather Service Employee Organization (NWSEO). NWS is eager to avoid the same pitfalls that hindered the previous effort. In a general sense, the workforce has a generational split. The older generation largely prefers the status quo for process, whereas the younger generation wants to see changes in the organization that includes new roles and responsibilities for forecasters. The older generation could prove resistant to some of the process changes that NWS wants to implement. NWS has been sensitive to this fact and works incrementally to socialize ideas for change and provide time to test out new changes before implementing on a full scale.

There is recent history between NWS and NWSEO has been marked by regular confrontation. When disagreements arise, parties often resort to third-party adjudication to resolve differences. This process is slow, costly, and hinders NWS' progress with the Evolve initiative. This bias towards confrontation exists partly because some provisions within the existing CBA incentivize NWSEO to favor third-party resolution. Another reason for conflict is the deterioration of trust between the parties. To help improve the relationship, NWS management has engaged the services of Overland Resources Group to facilitate regular "marriage counseling" sessions between the parties. This engagement exists in addition to, and independent from, the process to negotiate a new CBA.

Key Progress to Date

NWS has achieved recent technological advances such as upgrades to operational models, a new water model, and advances in supercomputing. Testing of the "National Blend of Models" is ongoing after which it will be implemented nationwide for operational forecasting. The Operations and Workforce Analysis (OWA) has completed its first phase of assessing the NWS and recommends actions to transform the workforce for new roles. The testing and evaluation phase begins next to determine the viability of the recommendations.

With respect to negotiating a new CBA, NWS management notified NWSEO that it intended to terminate the existing agreement in July 2015, and invited NWSEO to begin the process of negotiating a new CBA. As of August 2016, the management and union negotiating teams have nearly completed the process of establishing ground rules. It could take months or years to conclude negotiations, depending on the issues raised during the bargaining process.

Relevant Internal Stakeholders

The NWS workforce includes staff at national headquarters, national centers, regional headquarters, and field offices in 122 locations across the country. These staff members are key stakeholders who carry out the operational mission of providing forecasts for the country and who will feel the impact of changes. Technological advancements will allow them to do their jobs better and more efficiently, while also changing their day-to-day experience on the job. Organizational changes will alter their job roles and could also affect their job location, if their position is shifted from one office to another.

Relevant External Stakeholders

Many stakeholders are monitoring NWS organizational changes for different reasons. OMB has long believed that the NWS needs to face reductions and hopes that organizational changes will reduce workforce levels. Some members of Congress want to ensure that the local NWS offices in their jurisdiction do not see any relocation out of their area. Emergency managers are also watching the organizational changes to ensure they do not lose any of the support services which they depend on heavily. All three of these stakeholder groups should be engaged regularly when major milestones in organizational changes are achieved. We interact with these groups on a roughly quarterly timeline to ensure transparency and continued engagement as we socialize our plans for organizational change.

Relevant Inter-Agency Groups

FEMA has been a fundamentally critical partner in considering these organizational changes, because these changes focus on providing better public safety service to emergency managers. FEMA and the emergency managers provide third party validation of the need for these organizational changes.

Next Steps/Upcoming deadlines/Timing

Collective Bargaining Agreement:

* October 2016 – Federal Services Impasses Panel (FSIP) decides whether to assert jurisdiction over ground rules impasse. It is very likely they will assert jurisdiction.
* November 2016 (likely) – FSIP holds one-day mediation / arbitration meeting to settle outstanding question for ground rules.
* December 2016 – February 2017 (presumed) – NWS and NWSEO begins substantive bargaining over a new CBA.

Operations and Workforce Analysis:

* FY17-18: Testing and evaluation of insights gained from initial OWA assessment.
* FY18 and beyond: Implementation of any recommendations adopted during testing and evaluation.