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Sent: Tuesday, September 10, 2019 1:26 PM
To: Julie Roberts - NOAA Federal; Scott Smullen; Susan Buchanan
Subject: NYT: NOAA Chief, Defending Trump on Dorian, Also Tries to Buoy Scientists

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/10/climate/neil-jacobs-noaa-hurricane-dorian.html>

NOAA Chief, Defending Trump on Dorian, Also Tries to Buoy Scientists

By Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, Christopher Flavelle and Lisa Friedman
Sept. 10, 2019, 12:49 p.m. ET

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. — Neil Jacobs, head of the federal scientific agency threatened with firings after one of its offices contradicted President Trump on Hurricane Dorian, defended the administration Tuesday even as he issued a carefully worded defense of agency scientists.

The remarks were the latest example of a Trump administration official facing enormous political pressure in an atmosphere that prioritizes loyalty above all else.

“This administration is committed to the important mission of weather forecasting,” Dr. Jacobs, acting administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said in remarks at a weather conference here. “There is no pressure to change the way you communicate or forecast risk in the future.”

Dr. Jacobs’s speech attracted outsized attention because of President Trump’s insistence that Alabama was in Dorian’s path and a subsequent New York Times report that Commerce Secretary Wilbur L. Ross Jr. had threatened to fire NOAA’s political staff unless the agency stood by the president.

“He’s between a very big rock and a very hard place,” said Rear Admiral David W. Titley, a former oceanographer for the Navy who served as the chief operating officer of NOAA under President Barack Obama. “I would argue he needs to go home and look in the mirror and decide: Can he serve a boss who has no respect for the federal work force and the National Weather Service.”

On Sept. 1, Mr. Trump wrote on Twitter that Dorian would hit Alabama “harder than anticipated.” A few minutes later, the National Weather Service office in Birmingham, Ala., which is part of NOAA, posted on Twitter that “Alabama will NOT see any impacts from Dorian. We repeat, no impacts from Hurricane Dorian will be felt across Alabama.”

Mr. Trump pushed back, repeatedly insisting that his warning about Alabama had been accurate. (Alabama was not struck by the hurricane.)

Then, early last Friday, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross Jr., whose department has responsibility over NOAA, phoned Dr. Jacobs, telling him that the political staff at NOAA would be fired if the

situation was not fixed, according to three people familiar with the conversation. Later that day, NOAA issued an unusual, unsigned statement that rebuked the Birmingham office, calling its statement “inconsistent with probabilities from the best forecast products available at the time.”

That NOAA statement led to an uproar among scientists, who charged that the administration was politicizing the weather service. The Commerce Department’s Office of Inspector General is now examining the circumstances surrounding the statement, according to documents reviewed by The New York Times.

Tuesday’s speech by Dr. Jacobs, which had been scheduled before the hurricane, represented his first comments on the statement and the controversy. It almost didn’t happen.

According to three people familiar with the discussion, Dr. Jacobs met Monday afternoon with several Commerce Department officials, several of whom put pressure on him to cancel his speech. Dr. Jacobs, however, was adamant about appearing, the three people said.

He began by praising Mr. Trump, calling him “genuinely interested in improving weather forecasts.” Dr. Jacobs also echoed the president’s position that Dorian initially threatened Alabama. “At one point, Alabama was in the mix, as was the rest of the Southeast.”

Without retracting the statement his office issued on Friday, Dr. Jacobs also said he still had faith in the Birmingham office.

“The purpose of the NOAA statement was to clarify the technical aspects of the potential impacts of Dorian,” Dr. Jacobs said. “What it did not say, however, is that we understand and fully support the good intent of the Birmingham weather forecast office, which was to calm fears in support of public safety.”

“I am proud of the outstanding work performed by all the weather forecasting offices, including Birmingham, during the span of this storm,” Dr. Jacobs continued. “No one’s job is under threat — not mine, not yours. The weather service team has my full support and the support of the department.”

In the ballroom where meteorologists had gathered for their conference, the unsigned NOAA statement was all anyone seemed to be talking about. After Dr. Jacobs’s remarks, many of the forecasters mingling in the hallways outside settled on a common descriptor: diplomatic.

“He did the best he could in the situation,” said Christina Crowe, a forecaster with the National Weather Service.

Ms. Crowe noted that the speech was more muted than that of Louis W. Uccellini, the National Weather Service director, who received a standing ovation for his defense of the Birmingham office the day before. “It was a different tone than yesterday, but a lot of us understand why,” she said.

Elise Schultz, a research scientist in Huntsville who attended the conference, said Dr. Jacobs’s presence at the annual meeting had showed courage.

“He’s in a tough position,” she said. “He cares and wants to move forward. I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes.”

Many forecasters declined to speak on the record for fear of losing their jobs or of ratcheting up the political furor surrounding what many have always viewed as a nonpolitical government job.

The episode shined an uncomfortable spotlight on a quiet department best known for weather forecasting and monitoring oceans. A sub-agency under the Commerce Department with a budget that hovers around \$5 billion, NOAA does little in the way of regulation or policy, and has for the most part avoided controversy under the Trump administration.

Richard Hirn, general counsel for the National Weather Service Employees Organization, said the Dorian episode had crippled morale among employees. He said that in the past few years the National Weather Service had suffered so much from understaffing that employees had hit the federal statutory cap on overtime pay to fill shifts and now felt even less secure in their jobs.

“I’m afraid these people are just going to hang up their hat and leave,” Mr. Hirn said. “And if substantial numbers wind up retiring, the National Weather Service won’t be able to keep open the 122 forecast offices open 24-7, and there won’t be anyone to watch the radar or issue severe weather warnings.”

NOAA also has been without a Senate-confirmed administrator since the start of the Trump administration, the longest period without one since the agency was created in 1970.