

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-364](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

NWS has the critical responsibility of issuing weather forecasts and warnings to help protect life and property, especially as severe weather unfolds. Most NWS operational units across the nation operate 24 hours every day to issue forecasts and warnings. NOAA's WFMO processes NWS hiring requests and other actions related to human capital.

GAO was asked to review vacancies and hiring at NWS operational units. This report examines (1) information available on vacancies at NWS operational units for fiscal years 2010 through 2016, (2) any steps NWS operational unit management and staff have taken to address the impact of vacancies at their units, (3) the extent to which NOAA's WFMO makes information available to managers on the status of hiring requests, and (4) the extent to which NOAA's WFMO and NWS are taking actions to address the hiring backlog at operational units. GAO analyzed available vacancy data for fiscal years 2010 through 2016 and assessed the data's reliability; examined relevant documentation and interviewed NOAA, WFMO, and NWS officials; and visited a nongeneralizable sample of nine units selected to reflect geographic diversity and varying vacancy levels.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NOAA (1) ensure that complete information on hiring requests is routinely communicated to NWS managers and (2) evaluate whether NWS actions to reduce the hiring backlog are achieving expected results. NOAA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-17-364](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or FennellA@gao.gov.

May 2017

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

Actions Have Been Taken to Fill Increasing Vacancies, but Opportunities Exist to Improve and Evaluate Hiring

What GAO Found

Available data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Weather Service (NWS) indicate that the number of vacancies across its operational units has increased since fiscal year 2010. Specifically, agency data show that vacancies—unfilled positions at a point in time—increased from about 5 percent of the total number of positions at the end of fiscal year 2010 to about 11 percent in 2016. NWS officials reported that they did not have the resources to fill all of these vacancies and therefore developed additional data that factored in available resources. Based on these data, the vacancy rate across operational units was approximately 0.6 percent in fiscal year 2010 and increased to about 7 percent in fiscal year 2016.

NWS operational unit managers and staff GAO interviewed said they had taken several steps to address the impact of vacancies that remained unfilled for months, and in some cases, more than a year. These steps included managers and staff performing additional tasks to ensure forecasts and warnings were issued, staff adjusting their work and leave schedules, and managers requesting temporary staff from other units. However, taking these steps, according to managers and staff, at times led to their inability to complete other key tasks, such as providing severe weather information support to state and local emergency managers.

NOAA's Workforce Management Office (WFMO) makes limited information available to NWS managers on the status of their hiring requests. NWS managers said such information was critical for allocating resources and managing work, particularly in light of the length of the NWS hiring process. For example, agency data show that filling hiring requests selected for processing ranged from 64 to 467 days in fiscal year 2016. GAO found that complete information was often not available to managers, such as when the processing of a new hiring request was scheduled to begin. This is not consistent with federal internal control standards that call for management to communicate necessary quality information to achieve an entity's objectives. A WFMO official said the agency is working with the Department of Commerce to develop a new department-wide data system, potentially in 2017 that could provide improved tracking and reporting capabilities, but the design of the new system has not been finalized. In the interim, without complete information on the status of their requests, NWS operational unit managers are limited in their ability to plan for and distribute their unit's workload in the most efficient and effective manner.

NOAA's WFMO and NWS have taken some actions to help address NWS's hiring backlog. For example, NWS has combined job announcements for similar positions into one announcement. NWS officials said they believe such actions have allowed them to streamline hiring, but they have not evaluated the extent to which their actions have achieved expected results, consistent with federal internal control standards. NWS intends to develop a strategic human capital plan, which officials said could provide a framework for evaluating its hiring actions, but does not have a time frame for its development. In the interim, by evaluating whether its actions are reducing the hiring backlog, NWS would have better assurance that its actions were achieving expected results, and the agency could better determine where to devote resources.