June 26, 2020

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARY ROSS

FROM: Peggy E. Gustafson
Inspector General

SUBJECT: Evaluation of NOAA’s September 6, 2019, Statement About Hurricane Dorian Forecasts
Final Report No. OIG-20-032-I

On Friday, September 6, 2019—the day Hurricane Dorian made landfall in the United States as a Category 1 hurricane—the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) issued an unsigned statement (Statement). The Statement rebuked the NOAA National Weather Service’s (NWS’s) Birmingham, Alabama, office (NWS Birmingham) for a September 1, 2019, tweet that advised “Alabama will NOT see any impacts from #Dorian.”

On September 7, 2019, I issued a memorandum to the acting head of NOAA to notify him that our office was going to examine the circumstances surrounding the unsigned Statement and instituting a preservation hold on relevant documents.¹

There was significant internal and public backlash against the Statement, resulting in multiple complaints to our office from the public as well as Congressional inquiries. Among the complaints was that the Statement violated NOAA’s Scientific Integrity Policy; NOAA has since conducted an inquiry to determine whether its Scientific Integrity Policy had been violated. Our work to date, reported here, is separate and distinct from NOAA’s work under its Scientific Integrity Policy.

The attached report presents our findings as a detailed chronology and analysis of (I) the events leading up to the Statement, (II) the issuance of the Statement, and (III) the aftermath of the Statement. Our objective was to examine the circumstances surrounding the Statement, providing an independent account of the events that transpired in the interest of transparency and good government. Our conclusions, in brief, are the following:

I. The Department led a flawed process that discounted NOAA participation.

II. The Department required NOAA to issue a Statement that did not further NOAA’s or NWS’s interests.

III. The Department failed to account for the public safety intent of the NWS Birmingham tweet and the distinction between physical science and social science messaging.

IV. One NOAA employee deleted relevant text messages, and the Department’s federal records guidance is outdated.

We are providing a fully unredacted copy of the report for your review. This report is undergoing a privilege review, and the final report that will be publicly released on OIG’s website may be redacted for privilege purposes. In addition, OIG has applied minimal elective redactions for privacy purposes to the version of the report that will be publicly posted on OIG’s website on Monday, June 29, 2020, pursuant to section 8M of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended (5 U.S.C. App., § 8M). We are also providing you a copy of this version of the report for your information.
If you have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 482-4661.

Attachment

cc: Karen Dunn Kelley, Deputy Secretary of Commerce
    Michael J. Walsh, Jr., Chief of Staff
    Dr. Neil Jacobs, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Environmental
        Observation and Prediction, performing the duties of Under Secretary
        of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, NOAA
    Benjamin Friedman, Deputy Under Secretary for Operations, NOAA