Cantwell Threatens NOAA With Congressional Hearings

Local News

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Today, Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) expressed disappointment and threatened Congressional hearings over the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) failure to provide key information requested by Congress two months ago today. On October 16, 2009, Cantwell sent a letter to Department of Commerce and NOAA requesting that NOAA provide information pertinent to its decision to move its Marine Operations Center-Pacific (MOC-P) location from Puget Sound to Newport, Oregon. Among the requests made were for NOAA to provide: information on how the move impacts NOAA’s employees; information on how NOAA might cope with the difficulties of locating its research ships a significant distance from the agency’s scientists; and information on the indirect and long-term costs of moving NOAA’s fleet to Newport. Cantwell is chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and Coast Guard, which has primary oversight authority over NOAA.

“Throughout this entire ordeal, NOAA has claimed their process was fair and transparent,” Cantwell said. *“But the GAO’s ruling against NOAA earlier this month showed that NOAA’s process was not fair, and now NOAA’s failure to submit critical documents requested by Congress shows that the agency is being anything but transparent. We already know from the GAO’s findings that there were major problems with the Marine Operations Center-Pacific long-term lease competition, but NOAA’s unwillingness to answer basic questions makes me concerned there may be even bigger problems that haven’t yet come to light. If moving NOAA’s ships is truly the right decision for NOAA, then they shouldn’t have anything to hide.”*

In early December, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) ordered a review of the NOAA decision, sustaining a protest lodged by the Port of Bellingham, one of the bidders in the competition for the Marine Operations Center. The GAO determined that NOAA failed to take into account that the location of the proposed pier in Newport lies within a 100-year floodplain. Locating the NOAA facility in a floodplain is prohibited under both the competition’s rules and presidential Executive Order 11988.

Cantwell and other members of the Washington delegation responded to the GAO’s findings, calling on NOAA and the Department of Commerce to follow the GAO’s recommendation and comply with the floodplain restrictions of Executive Order 11988. In a letter dated December 11, 2009, Cantwell and others stressed that as the agency moves forward, it needs to bring a renewed sense of independence and credibility to the decision-making process: “We fear that if the decisions on how to respond to GAO’s findings continue to rest with those who conducted the original flawed competition, we will see brazen attempts to preserve the award to Newport rather than any real effort to comply with the spirit of GAO’s recommendations and Executive Order 11988.”

Since NOAA announced its proposal to move NOAA’s fleet of scientific ships to Oregon in

August, Cantwell has raised numerous policy concerns about the agency’s decision. Cantwell, Murray, and several other members of the Washington delegation have asked: whether moving NOAA’s fleet outside Puget Sound would damage NOAA’s scientific missions; whether it would hurt NOAA’s capacity to hire and retain qualified mariners; whether NOAA fully understood the consequences of moving its ships away from a major maritime center; and whether NOAA ignored crucial weather factors in the Pacific Northwest.

For more information, please see the following letters sent to the Department of Commerce and NOAA by Cantwell and others from the Washington delegation:

8-14-09: First Request for Information
10-13-09: Impacts on Scientific Missions
10-16-09: Second Request for Information
10-19-09: Ability to Hire Mariners
11-23-09: Problems with Distancing MOC-P from Maritime Center
11-25-09: Concerns About Oceans and Weather Conditions
12-11-09: Response to GAO Findings