



The Future of NOAA and Implications for Counties

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), long considered the nation’s primary source for weather forecasts, climate research, and ocean management, is facing one of the most uncertain periods in its history. While NOAA continues to provide core forecasting services, its broader mission and long-term stability are being tested by proposed budget cuts, staffing challenges, and political debate over its role.

Leadership in Transition

Since March 2025, Laura Grimm has served as Acting Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator. She leads the agency at a time when both its funding and staffing models are in flux, with Congress and the White House charting different paths for its future.

The Administration’s Proposal

The Trump administration’s FY 2026 budget blueprint calls for a 27 percent reduction in NOAA’s funding, cutting it from approximately \$6.1 billion in FY 2025 to about \$4.5 billion. The proposal would eliminate NOAA’s Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (OAR), the agency’s primary climate science division, and shift certain responsibilities—such as aspects of fisheries and marine mammal oversight—to other federal agencies.

At the same time, the White House budget proposal seeks to preserve NOAA’s “mission-essential” functions, including core forecasting operations within the National Weather Service (NWS).

Congressional Pushback

Lawmakers from both parties have voiced resistance to the proposed cuts. A Senate appropriations subcommittee has advanced a draft budget that would keep NOAA’s funding close to its current level, around \$6.1 billion. Senators stressed the importance of maintaining climate research, fisheries oversight, and local weather services that communities depend on.

This clash between the administration’s proposal and congressional priorities sets the stage for a drawn-out negotiation over NOAA’s FY 2026 budget.

Staffing and Operational Strain

In addition to budget uncertainty, NOAA is dealing with workforce instability. Reports indicate that hundreds of probationary staff members have been terminated or resigned in recent months. These losses have raised concerns about the agency's capacity to sustain operations, particularly in the National Weather Service, where forecasters have struggled to maintain normal schedules for weather balloon launches and regional forecasts.

Agency officials say they are working to stabilize staffing by prioritizing "mission-critical" hires for NWS field offices.

Broader Implications

If enacted, the proposed budget cuts could reverberate far beyond the agency:

- **Weather Forecasting:** Reduced resources risk delaying or degrading severe weather warnings.
- **Climate Science:** Eliminating NOAA's climate research arm would curtail U.S. capacity to model, observe, and anticipate long-term climate trends.
- **Marine and Fisheries Management:** Shifting NOAA's current roles to other agencies could alter regulatory consistency and slow permitting processes.
- **Institutional Knowledge:** Staff departures threaten the retention of decades of expertise in meteorology, oceanography, and fisheries science.

County Government Perspective

Counties rely heavily on NOAA's services, particularly through the National Weather Service, for both emergency management and long-term planning.

- **Public Safety:** Timely and accurate severe weather forecasts are critical for county emergency operations centers, sheriff's offices, and first responders preparing for tornadoes, floods, and winter storms.
- **Disaster Recovery:** Streamlined and reliable forecasts directly affect FEMA disaster declarations and county-level reimbursement processes.
- **Infrastructure & Planning:** NOAA climate data helps counties make decisions about stormwater systems, road construction, and floodplain management.
- **Agriculture & Economy:** Rural counties depend on seasonal climate outlooks and drought monitoring to support farming operations and local economies.
- **Community Trust:** Counties are often the "front line" for residents during disasters; if NOAA's capabilities weaken, local governments may bear the burden of filling communication and planning gaps.

For counties, NOAA's future is not an abstract federal issue—it shapes local preparedness, resilience, and the ability to protect residents.