

Last spring, on March 3, Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS) introduced the Flood Level Observation, Operations, and Decision Support Act or FLOODS Act (S. 558) to improve National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) forecasting and communication related to flood, tornado, and hurricane events. Among other provisions, the bill directs NOAA to establish a National Integrated Flood Information System (NIFIS) to better inform and provide more timely decision-making to reduce flood-related effects and costs, emulating the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS). On September 30, the Senate passed S. 558 with an amendment by unanimous consent. The bill is currently held at the desk on the House side.

S.558 would: (1) establish partnerships with institutions of higher education and federal agencies to improve total water predictions; (2) designate a service coordination hydrologist at each National Weather Service (NWS) River Forecast Center (RFC) to increase impact-based decision support services at the state and local level; (3) require NOAA to evaluate and improve flood watches and warnings and communication to support preparation and responses to floods; (4) ensure that the tornado warning improvement and extension program periodically examines the value of incorporating innovative observations, such as acoustic or infrasonic measurements, observations from phased array radars, and observations from mesonets; (5) require NOAA to estimate and communicate the frequency of precipitation; (6) establish an Interagency Committee on Water Management and Infrastructure to ensure that federal agencies with joint or overlapping responsibilities engage and work together on water-related matters, including water storage and supplies, water quality and restoration activities, water infrastructure, transportation on rivers and inland waterways, and water forecasting; and (7) direct NOAA to conduct an analysis of gaps in the availability of snow-related data to assess and predict floods and flood impacts.

On the House side, last February, Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ) introduced the PRECIP (H.R. 1437) and FLOODS (H.R. 1438) bills to require NOAA, no less than every five years, to update precipitation frequency estimates and make publicly available certain studies, and together with the National Academies study the state of practice and research needs for precipitation estimation. NOAA is also directed to consult with relevant partners on the development of a plan to update probable maximum precipitation (PMP) estimates, and develop guidance that: (1) provides best practices for federal and state regulatory agencies, private meteorological consultants, and other users; (2) considers the recommendations provided in the National Academies study; (3) facilitates review of probable maximum precipitation studies by regulatory agencies; and (4) provides confidence in regional and site-specific probable maximum precipitation estimates. No hearings have been scheduled.

“Flooding can be devastating for homeowners, business owners, and communities across the country,” said Rep. Sherrill. “The FLOODS Act and the PRECIP Act will help the federal government improve forecasting and communication of flood, tornado, and hurricane events to better serve communities at risk for flooding events,” It would establish a National Integrated Flood Information System (NIFIS) to coordinate and integrate NOAA flood research, and partner with institutions of higher education to improve total water predictions and establish a committee to ensure coordination of federal departments. It would also improve flood risk communications, including flood watches and warnings.

The Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO), Association of State Floodplain Management (ASFPM), American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), American Public Works Association (APWA), and others, have supported the FLOODS Act. H.R. 1438 currently has 14 Democrat and 2 Republican co-sponsors, including Representatives Grace Napolitano (D-CA), Sharice Davids (D-KS), and Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX). H.R. 1437 similarly has 15 Democrat and 1 Republican co-sponsors, including Representatives Napolitano and Johnson.

Regarding the PRECIP and FLOODS acts, the Council has consistently supported federal legislation and appropriations to enhance and expand the availability of and access to consistent and comprehensive water data (Position #473). The Council has highlighted the “serious need for adequate and consistent federal funding to maintain, restore, modernize, and upgrade federal water, weather and climate observation programs, not only to avoid the loss or further erosion of critical information and data, but also to address new emerging needs, with a primary focus on coordinated data collection and dissemination.” The objective is to make “...information available to decisionmakers in natural resources and emergency management, and thus better protect the public safety, welfare and the environment,” recognizing the “demands for water and related climate data continue to increase, and this information is used by federal, state, tribal, and local government agencies, as well as private entities and individuals to: (1) forecast flooding, drought and other climate-related events; (2) project future water supplies for agricultural, municipal, and industrial uses; (3) estimate streamflows for hydropower production, recreation, and environmental purposes, such as for fish and wildlife management, including endangered species needs; and (4) facilitate water management and administration of water rights, decrees, and interstate compacts.”