

Zharoff protests Weather Service restructuring

In a letter to U.S. Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher, State Sen. Fred Zharoff, D-Kodiak, protested the restructuring plans for National Weather Service operations in Alaska.

"The plan does not take into account Alaska's unique conditions," he said. "The restructuring will leave huge gaps in the accuracy of weather forecasting in Alaska. These are gaps that will not occur in the Lower 48."

Under the plan, the service will centralize weather forecasting operations in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau. Three field offices will be closed and the remaining 11 downgraded in their functions. The plan calls for new automated equipment, radar and a new satellite to make up the gaps.

In the letter, Zharoff noted that many states in the Lower 48 with less land area, less coastline and much smaller fishing fleets will have many more full-service weather stations, while Alaska is reduced to three.

"How can this much centralization for Alaska be justified?" Zharoff asked.

He noted that automated equipment can break down and significant delays may occur before it can be replaced.

"There is no substitute for the trained people working out in the field offices and their ability to submit accurate observations and data about changing weather conditions," Zharoff said.

In his letter, Zharoff stressed the importance to Alaska's fishing fleet of accurate and immediate notification of adverse changes in the weather. He also discussed his district's dependence on air and marine transportation and the unfavorable weather conditions present in Southwest Alaska throughout the year.

"Lives and property are at risk without the best possible weather information," he said.

The final decision on the restructuring plan is being made by Mosbacher. Interested individuals may write him at the Commerce Department, Herbert C. Hoover Building, 14th Street between Constitution Avenue and E Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20230.