

Christopher Vaccaro - NOAA Federal

From: Christopher Vaccaro - NOAA Federal
Sent: Tuesday, September 10, 2019 9:09 AM
To: Susan Buchanan; Matthew Borgia
Subject: E&E: Democrats want Commerce chief gone over forecast spat

POLITICS

<https://www.eenews.net/eedaily/2019/09/10/stories/1061111721>

Democrats want Commerce chief gone over forecast spat

Rob Hotakainen, E&E News reporter Published: Tuesday, September 10, 2019

Some House Democrats yesterday urged Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to resign for allegedly threatening to fire NOAA officials who challenged President Trump's erroneous claims that Hurricane Dorian might strike Alabama last week.

"Wilbur Ross must resign," said Virginia Rep. Don Beyer. "His direct attacks on the scientists and federal employees, whom he threatened to fire for doing their jobs by accurately reporting the weather, are an embarrassing new low for a member of this Cabinet, which has been historically venal and incompetent."

Beyer, a prominent voice on energy and environmental issues, said in a statement that Ross "should be dismissed immediately."

Rep. Paul Tonko (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on the Environment and Climate Change, said Ross had put government scientists in an "impossible position."

"Telling forecasters they aren't allowed to contradict the President when he is giving dangerously false information compromises their duty as civil servants and undermines the vital role they play in protecting community safety," Tonko said.

Reps. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.) and Jim Himes (D-Conn.) were also among those who said Ross should leave if he threatened to fire NOAA leaders over the Alabama forecast spat.

The Democrats jumped into the fray after *The New York Times*, citing three anonymous sources, reported that Ross had threatened to fire NOAA's acting director, Neil Jacobs, if he did not side with Trump in the controversy.

The firestorm began when Trump tweeted that the storm might hit Alabama, later in the week displaying a doctored weather map to help make his case.

In response to Trump's tweet, the Birmingham office tweeted that Alabama was not in Dorian's path, apparently angering both Trump and Ross.

According to the newspaper report, Ross asked Jacobs to overrule the Alabama forecasters, which Jacobs refused to do. Jacobs was then told by Ross that political staff at NOAA would be dismissed if the situation wasn't resolved, the *Times* said. On Friday afternoon, NOAA put out an unsigned statement saying the Birmingham office had erred.

The issue is already under investigation by NOAA's acting chief scientist, who told employees Sunday evening that he would determine whether the agency violated its own policies by siding with Trump.

"My understanding is that this intervention to contradict the forecaster was not based on science but on external factors including reputation and appearance, or simply put, political," Craig McLean, the acting chief scientist, said in an email to employees, calling it "a complex issue involving the President."

Louis Uccellini, the director of the National Weather Service, drew a standing ovation yesterday at the annual meeting of the National Weather Association in Huntsville, Ala., when he praised the work of the Birmingham office, saying the forecasters were only doing their jobs and trying to avoid public panic.

Jacobs is expected to give the keynote speech at the gathering this morning.

Democratic Sen. Doug Jones of Alabama declined to call for Ross' departure, saying instead that he would wait for the ongoing investigation to run its course. But he added that Congress has more serious issues to address rather than fighting over a "Sharpie-drawn map."

"Nobody in Alabama thought we were in any danger," Jones added. "We have hurricanes, we have tornadoes, we have bad weather, and we learn to listen to our local people [who] we trust."

Senate Appropriations Chairman Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) seemed to defend Trump by suggesting that it's "common sense," if a hurricane is headed to Florida, to ask if might also be nearing Alabama. He said he did not know anything about reports of a rift between NWS forecasters in Birmingham and NOAA leadership over the president's remarks on the storm.

Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), a member of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, called for a hearing on the issue. "Science trumps false statements, including when they come from the White House," Markey said.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said, "What started as an embarrassment from the president has snowballed into thuggish behavior from a Cabinet secretary to force scientists to bow down in obeisance to an anti-science president."

Reporters Geof Koss, Nick Sobczyk and George Cahlink contributed.