NEWSLETTER
National Weather Association

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

THE FUTURE OF WEATHER FORECASTING IS NOW

It is an exhilarating time to be in the weather forecast industry. Virtually every weather professional has access to data from new observing systems, improved computer guidance, and high speed communications. If nothing else, less than 20 bucks a month will get you Internet access so that you can receive more real-time meteorological information in your home than was available at most private-sector, military and National Weather Service offices just a few years ago. Yet, operational forecasters still face a daunting challenge. Even with a plethora of weather data, the information content of most weather forecasts has changed very little.

Recently, I spent an extended weekend hiking in the mountains of the Southeast. Temperatures were well above normal, and there was a constant threat of showers and thunderstorms. Such a scenario would seem ideal for today's observing systems. We know where storm development is likely, where precipitation is occurring, and the speed and direction of the storms. However, none of this information made it to the people on the trails. The message that made it out to the public was that there was between a 30% and 60% chance of rain. This is great information, but does it justify the cost the taxpayers paid to modernize the nation's weather observing systems?

All of us can cite cases where the latest weather information simply does not make it through the system and into our products. The adage that we need to find new ways to do our business has never been truer.

While it may never be possible to give anything but a range of temperatures for a city, it is frequently possible to tell people where showers are and when rain will begin and end. For instance, during televised sports events, we most likely have all heard announcers say things like "although the rain is diminishing, another line of storms will be coming through in an hour." If we know this type of detailed information, we ought to pass it on to all of our users. We must develop better ways to tell the public what we know to energize them to respond appropriately especially in severe weather situations.

Products that emphasize the what, when and where of impending weather are of the most use to our public. While the overnight minimum temperature is important for industrial and agricultural purposes, for many people the temperature at mid-evening is even more important. If listeners are going to attend a sporting event or other outdoor activity, they need to make decisions on how to dress and possibly what transportation to use. Forecasts of today's snowfall amount are useful, but much of the working public really wants to know when the snow will start and if it will stop in time for the snowplow to clear the roads by business quitting time. While some private-sector and military meteorologists already provide such specific forecasts, the vast majority of us do not. All forecasters, whether they work for the NWS, a radio or television station, other government agencies or a private-sector forecast firm should have a goal of providing this type of information to their customers.

Current dissemination techniques often hinder our capability to provide better information. Part of the answer lies in using easily understood graphics and grids in conjunction with text to present forecasts. With the Internet, there is the potential to issue interactive forecasts where the user points to an area on a map and receives a tailored forecast. However, such innovations will not solve the entire problem. Most often, the people with the greatest need for detailed forecasts are engaged in activities where radio (or cell phone) communication is the only option. While this might also change with new technologies, there is little doubt that for the foreseeable future text and/or voice will remain the principal methods of delivering our most essential products.

This issue spans both the public and the private sector and it is incumbent that the weather service community work together as partners in exploring and developing ways of increasing the information content — the "decision making" and "action getting" content — of weather service products.

- Joe Schaefer

Happy Thanksgiving!

The NWA Council and staff send thanks to all individual and corporate members for supporting the NWA and its objectives. Special thanks to those who have voluntarily assisted with committee activities, Annual Meeting program and arrangements, local chapters, the publication editors and those that submitted articles for the NWA Newsletter and *National Weather Digest*.