

# Michigan weather service vacancies spur fears storm predictions will falter

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Michigan's National Weather Service offices are beset by vacancies, sparking concerns that the Trump administration's cuts to the agency could hamper its capacity to predict and mitigate destruction from storms.

The state's four NWS field offices — covering Detroit, Grand Rapids, Gaylord and Marquette — have seen their vacancy rates increase by an average of 12 percentage points since President Donald Trump took office in January, according to data from Tom Fahy, the legislative director of the National Weather Service Employees' Union.

Altogether, 22 of the state's 91 NWS positions are unstaffed as the catastrophic Guadalupe River flooding in central Texas, which killed at least 120 people on July 4, has focused attention on the importance of accurate forecasts and prompt, effective warning systems.

As extreme weather events [increase](#) in frequency across the country, experts and some lawmakers see now as an especially inopportune time to scale back the weather service. Also at play is a broader reckoning on the impacts of the Trump administration's sweeping cuts to the federal bureaucracy, which the U.S. Supreme Court tacitly [paved](#) the way for this week.

With the vacancies in Michigan, "There is definitely going to be an increased risk to the public and municipalities," said Richard Rood, a professor emeritus at the University of Michigan who studies the climate and has consulted for the NWS.

Most affected by the vacancies is the Marquette office, which normally has 22 staff members. The number of open positions there has jumped from three to eight — taking its vacancy rate from 14% to 36%, according to the union's data. The state's northernmost office also

currently lacks a warning coordinating manager, a position experts say is especially crucial during emergencies.

The field office covering Detroit has seen its vacancy rate hold steady at 17% from before Trump took office to now. The vacancy rates for the Gaylord and Grand Rapids field offices have also at least doubled, increasing from 9% to 23%, and 13% to 26%, respectively.

The Detroit News asked NWS to provide its own data on vacancies in Michigan's field offices, a request the weather service declined. A department spokesperson said "mission-critical" positions in field offices across the country are being refilled, but did not answer questions seeking specifics on staffing in Michigan.

## A focus on Texas disaster

The Guadalupe River flood in Texas' Kerr County was the country's deadliest in decades. Among those killed were 27 girls at a Christian summer camp, including the [twin granddaughters](#) of former Detroit Free Press publisher David Lawrence. As of Friday, more than 170 people were still [unaccounted for](#), according to the Associated Press.

In the fallout from the flood, blame for how the emergency was handled has been aimed in multiple directions, including at local and state officials in Texas, and forecasters. Many have suggested human error largely wasn't a factor, given the freak nature of the flash flood's rapid intensification late at night.

But some experts and former weather service administrators have drawn a line from the Trump administration's cuts to the agency — which caused vacancies in the Texas offices handling the disaster — to the scale of destruction.

U.S. Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer [called](#) for the Department of Commerce's acting inspector general to investigate whether understaffing caused "delays, gaps or diminished accuracy" in forecasting the flooding, and to examine the San Antonio field office's correspondence with local officials. Trump, on the other hand, has [contended](#) that vacancies weren't a factor, saying the flooding was "a thing that happened in seconds. Nobody expected it. Nobody saw it."

Floods in North Carolina and New Mexico have claimed several lives in the days since the Texas catastrophe.

Nearly 600 weather service employees have left this year. Some were laid off by the Trump administration, while others accepted its deferred resignation offers. That downsizing is part of a broader campaign by Trump's controversial Department of Government Efficiency, which has cut agencies across the government, including the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of Education and the National Institutes of Health.

## Shortages 'unacceptable'

The vacancies are seen by Michigan Democrats as another potentially harmful consequence of the Trump administration's widespread downsizing of the federal bureaucracy.

U.S. Rep. Haley Stevens, a Democrat whose district contains the field office for the Detroit region in White Lake, called the vacancies "more typical chaos" from the Trump administration, which are "frustrating to everyday Michiganders" and the impacted offices.

Grand Rapids falls within Democratic U.S. Rep. Hillary Scholten's district. She said in a statement, "Similar to Kerr County, West Michigan is built up around a beautiful and powerful waterway, and we must be prepared and vigilant."

"Vacancies at the National Weather Service — both in Michigan and nationwide — are unacceptable," she added. "At a time when super storms and flash flooding are on the rise, we need to be increasing, not decreasing, the number of staff and support available to deal with these natural disasters."

U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, a Democrat, introduced [legislation](#) last month that would permanently exempt certain NWS positions from a federal hiring freeze. That came shortly after the department was [granted](#) permission by the Trump administration to hire back for 126 of the nearly 600 positions cut earlier this year.

The vacancies in Michigan don't concern everyone.

Republican state Rep. Matt Maddock suggested in a text to The News that the open jobs are among the positions that have been justifiably eliminated to trim unnecessary government spending: "If you cut a dollar from a budget, was that dollar critical to prevent a bureaucracy from failing?"

He added, "Leftists are stealing the tears from this tragedy to spin their own narratives and it's disgusting," referencing some [Democrats' claims](#) that Trump administration cuts

contributed to the scale of destruction in Texas.

## A privatization push?

Consternation around the Michigan vacancies come as a years-long conservative push to privatize weather agencies could be taking shape. Two of Trump's nominees to lead the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have [close financial ties](#) to weather-related industries and corporations that could benefit from privatization. One has previously said the agency should rely more on the commercial sector.

Trump has selected Neil Jacobs, the chief atmospheric scientist for Panasonic Weather Solutions, to lead NOAA. Taylor Jordan, a lobbyist with several clients in weather-related industries, is the president's pick for another top post.

A NWS privatization plan was included in Project 2025, the exhaustive conservative blueprint that meticulously explained how Trump could concentrate power in the executive branch during his then-prospective second term.

The prospect troubles some.

Sue Anne Bell is an associate professor at the University of Michigan School of Nursing who has studied disaster preparedness. She said a profit-driven weather service might look to cushion its bottom line by reducing allocations to states seen as relatively less vulnerable to extreme weather.

"Then, when a disaster does hit, you are scrambling," Bell said.

Others are tempering fears that Trump's NOAA nominations of Jacobs and Jordan signal a move toward privatization.

John Sokic, who served as the NWS director of congressional affairs up until January, pointed to Jacobs' [testimony](#) in a congressional hearing Wednesday that staffing field offices will be a top priority if confirmed.

What's more, the Texas flood's spotlight on the NWS vacancies will turn up the political pressure to staff the agency, Sokic said.

And, Trump last month allowed the NWS to refill 126 of the near 600 positions he had cut, despite the hiring freeze he had imposed across the government. That walk-back, Sokic said,

suggests the president isn't strictly adhering to Project 2025's vision for the weather service.

"However, if the administration wants to implement Project 2025, and Neil and Taylor object, which I believe they would, they will be terminated," he added.

## **Filling some vacancies?**

In a statement to The News, NOAA maintained that important vacancies across the country are being filled, but didn't provide any specifics on Michigan.

"NWS continues to conduct short-term Temporary Duty assignments (TDYs), and is in the process of conducting a series of Reassignment Opportunity Notices (RONs) to fill roles at NWS field locations with the greatest operational need," said Erica Cei, a NOAA spokesperson. "Additionally, a targeted number of permanent, mission-critical field positions will soon be advertised under an exception to the Department-wide hiring freeze to further stabilize frontline operations."

Cei did not respond to questions on the extent to which Michigan's offices will be prioritized in the restaffing, and when positions will be filled.

The Detroit, Gaylord and Grand Rapids offices all have a full four-person management staff, but the Marquette office is short two out of four, according to the NWS Employees' Union data. Among meteorologists, the offices have vacancy rates of 14%, 23%, 38% and 46% respectively; vacancy rates in those offices for lead forecaster positions are 17%, 33%, 33% and 60%.

Fahy, the legislative director of the NWS Employees' Union, said the Detroit field office is helping the Grand Rapids office by "observing its weather events" due to the latter's short staffing. Likewise, the field offices for Gaylord and Green Bay, Wisconsin, are assisting the Marquette office.

The management positions the Marquette office is missing are the electronic systems analyst and a warning coordination manager. The latter vacancy is a particular cause of concern for Rood. He described the person in that role as being tasked with "following up" with local authorities after initial weather alerts go out, ensuring they've been received and acted upon.

The warning coordination manager position was vacant in the San Antonio, Texas, field office, which was in charge of handling much of the emergency response during the

Guadalupe River flooding. Rick Spinrad, a former NOAA administrator under President Joe Biden, [told CNN](#) that vacancy was "one of the problematic issues" in the response.

Rood said that weather offices across the country will be fighting over limited resources, and that Michigan may not get first priority. Coastal states are largely considered the most vulnerable to climate disaster.

But Michigan should not be considered a "climate haven," Rood said, adding "no state is immune in a warming climate." He pointed to flash flooding in 2020 after heavy rains compounded a dam failure in [Midland](#), which damaged more than 2,500 houses and businesses and forced the evacuation of more than 10,000 people.

Bell, the other UM professor, cited the historic ice storm earlier this year in northern Michigan. It knocked out power to at least 90,000 residential and business customers.

"I was up north last weekend and seeing thousands of trees snapped off," she said. "My kids went to a summer camp and they couldn't play in the woods because of the damage from the ice storm. There were still falling limbs."

The NWS is among the federal departments where the Trump administration has walked back some initial cuts by its Department of Government Efficiency, led by billionaire Elon Musk before a dramatic falling out with the president last month. Politico [reported](#) this week, however, that despite getting approval more than a month ago to fill 126 of nearly 600 weather service jobs that were cut, the agency has not posted job listings.

Sokic, the former director of congressional affairs at the weather service, said he doesn't expect those jobs to be filled until August or September.

He also said the Trump administration's federal job cuts could discourage applicants:

"Are people going to say, 'I'm not going to be part of this, I'm going to just get fired again?'"

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