



Highlights of [GAO-09-772T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Science and Technology, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS)—a tri-agency acquisition managed by the Department of Commerce’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)—is considered critical to the United States’ ability to maintain the continuity of data required for weather forecasting (including severe weather events such as hurricanes) and global climate monitoring. Since its inception, NPOESS has experienced escalating costs, schedule delays, and technical difficulties. As the often-delayed launch of its demonstration satellite (called the NPOESS Preparatory Project—NPP) draws closer, these problems continue.

GAO was asked to summarize its report being released today that (1) identifies the status and risks of key program components, (2) assesses the NPOESS Executive Committee’s ability to fulfill its responsibilities, and (3) evaluates efforts to identify an alternative system integrator for later NPOESS satellites.

What GAO Recommends

In its report, GAO recommended steps to improve the effectiveness of the Executive Committee. NASA and Commerce officials concurred with the recommendations; DOD concurred with one and partially concurred with the other recommendations.

[View GAO-09-772T or key components.](#) For more information, contact David A. Powner at (202) 512-9286 or pownerd@gao.gov.

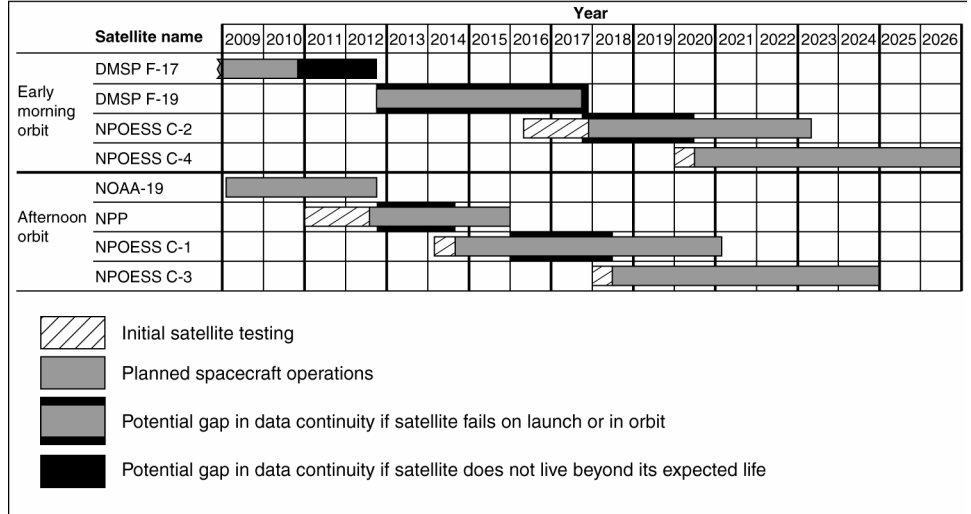
POLAR-ORBITING SATELLITES

With Costs Increasing and Data Continuity at Risk, Improvements Needed in Tri-agency Decision Making

What GAO Found

The NPOESS program’s approved cost and schedule baseline is not achievable and problems with two critical sensors continue to drive the program’s cost and schedule. Costs are expected to grow by about \$1 billion from the current \$13.95 billion cost estimate, and the schedules for NPP and the first two NPOESS satellites are expected to be delayed by 7, 14, and 5 months, respectively. These delays endanger the continuity of weather and climate satellite data because there will not be a satellite available as a backup should a satellite fail on launch or in orbit—loss of a Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) satellite, an NPOESS satellite, or NPP could result in a 3 to 5 year gap in data continuity (see figure below). Program officials reported that they are assessing alternatives for mitigating risks, and that they plan to propose a new cost and schedule baseline by the end of June 2009. However, the Executive Committee does not have an estimate for when it will make critical decisions on cost, schedule, and risk mitigation.

Potential Gaps in Data Continuity



Source: GAO analysis of DOD, NOAA, and NPOESS Integrated Program Office data.

While the NPOESS Executive Committee has made improvements over the last several years in response to prior recommendations, it has not effectively fulfilled its responsibilities and does not have the membership and leadership it needs to effectively or efficiently oversee and direct the NPOESS program. Until its shortfalls are addressed, the Committee will be unable to effectively oversee the NPOESS program—and important issues involving cost growth, schedule delays, and satellite continuity will likely remain unresolved.

The NPOESS program has conducted two successive studies of alternatives to using the existing system integrator for the last two NPOESS satellites, but neither identified a viable alternative to the current contractor. Program officials plan to conduct a final study prior to the June 2010 decision on whether to proceed with the existing prime contractor.