Bill Would Expand U.S. Drought Monitoring

PAGE 198

The collection and dissemination of drought information would be centralized within the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) under a newly proposed bill, which received support at a 4 May hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Science Subcommittee on Environment, Technology, and Standards. The economic costs of drought average $6 to $8 billion each year in the United States, according to NOAA. The effects of prolonged drought include extreme wildfire conditions, water restrictions, and reduced crop yields.

The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) Act of 2006, H.R. 5136, would give NOAA $12–18 million per year between 2007 and 2012 to create a drought monitoring and forecasting system that could provide users with better early warnings of drought.

Chester Koblinsky, director of NOAA's Climate Program Office, said that the agency is already developing an implementation plan and has laid out three basic steps: (1) improve observations, such as soil moisture and ground water networks, and consolidate the data and its delivery through internet portals; (2) conduct research, improve analyses, forecasts, and decision support, and build pilot projects in critical areas; and (3) expand the pilot projects into a national system. NOAA estimates that full implementation would take five to six years, Koblinsky said.

However, the success of NIDIS depends on the system effectively working with other areas of government that collect information used to monitor and forecast drought. Koblinsky noted that there is a dearth of soil moisture sensors and that there is concern...