



## A message from the NOAA Administrator

**October 20, 2022**

Dear NOAA Colleagues,

This past spring we launched the NOAA Workforce Burnout Survey to help identify the extent and key drivers of burnout within NOAA, and enable us to develop short and long term solutions to address it. I believe it is very important for NOAA leadership to share what we heard and the steps we are taking to address burnout here at NOAA.

Nearly 37% of NOAA's federal workforce (~4,500 individuals) took the survey; 3,200 opted to also include a write-in comment in the space provided. The high response rate gives me confidence that the survey results cover the spectrum of experience for NOAA employees. The results make clear that burnout is real at NOAA, and I and the NOAA leadership are working on a plan to address this problem in both the short and long term.

### ***WHAT WE HEARD***

A summary of the responses to each of the survey questions may be found on a newly launched [NOAA Burnout Resources](#) intranet site. The survey results confirmed that burnout is real, pervasive, and long-standing in our workforce. Overall, more than 80% of the respondents experienced some form of burnout in the past year. The top three reasons cited were: excessive workload (42.2%); uncertainty about future workplace telework/remote work flexibility (34.8%); and too many urgent deadlines/quick turnaround requests (32.4%).

More than 3,200 people thoughtfully provided comments, concerns, and recommendations for specific areas of improvement and many great suggestions for solutions. I also want to recognize the personal hardships and stress people conveyed, and the desire to fix the issues. Responses fell generally into the following categories-

- Remote Work/Telework - 802
- Resources/Staffing - 1,242
- Management Engagement/Culture - 1,260
- Workforce Expectations - 826
- Workday Policy Changes - 1,236

### ***WHAT WE ARE DOING***

The survey results make clear what we have been hearing anecdotally, that burnout is real here at NOAA and that we need to take a deliberate and comprehensive look at the way we manage our workdays, assess workloads, resources, staffing, and the way we both prioritize and deprioritize initiatives and goals. Clearly, some of these issues have deep root causes that a simple, short-term remedy will not fix. Rather, addressing the issues of burnout will require sustained, long-term engagement and commitment by leadership and everyone in the organization. Doing

so will help achieve a culture shift in how we accomplish our mission in a manner that reduces existing and avoids creating workforce burnout.

Line and staff office leaders have recently received the anonymized survey data and I have asked them to immediately implement specific near-term actions, choosing from an initial toolbox of actions, most appropriate to the situation within their offices. While I fully recognize that there are systemic organizational changes needed - and we continue to work on those - there are operational steps that we can implement immediately. As leaders review the data, you will hear more about the specific actions that will be taken for your office. The various types of near-term actions that may be taken may be found on the [NOAA Burnout Resources](#) internal website. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Unless urgent, avoid sending or replying to email outside of local office hours (5 pm and 8 am), weekends, or holidays
- Prioritize assignments and, unless unforeseeable and urgent, avoid quick turnaround tasks of less than 24 hours and provide flexibility in other deadlines to accommodate
- Do not schedule meetings during local lunchtime (12-1pm)
- Limit meetings to local hours of between 9 am and 5 pm
- Reduce meeting times (e.g., 45/50 minutes instead of 60) to allow breaks between meetings

Even some of these seemingly simple actions will have some challenges, e.g., with offices across multiple time zones, some with 24/7 operations. I have asked Ben Friedman to ensure the NOAA Executive Panel (NEP) monitors progress and receives periodic updates on the status, challenges, and successes of these initial efforts being made in each of your respective Line and Staff offices. I have also asked him to coordinate these efforts with other NOAA-wide total worker health initiatives (e.g., Mindful NOAA).

For the long term, the objective is to allow NOAA to sustainably achieve mission objectives in a manner that reduces existing burnout and avoids creating more of it. And with the resources that we have recently obtained, I believe we may have new opportunities to address some of the workforce-related solutions. Next steps will be for the NEP Workforce Burnout Working Group to support the development of a root cause analysis- a deep dive of comments and other data --to understand the underlying factors contributing to widespread burnout, and then to develop and recommend policies and actions to address these root causes of burnout. These could include analyzing and restructuring staffing models at a local level to balance productivity/efficiency versus resiliency; standardizing processes to create workflow efficiency and prioritization; and training for supervisors and employees to recognize the symptoms of burnout and provide tools to assist in managing workflow.

Many survey responses pointed to a lack of resources and staffing and being asked to do more with less. I have heard this most recently in the context of the initiatives NOAA is responsible for under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, and I am committed to using resources provided for implementation of these laws to increase staffing and to minimize any additional burden on our workforce over the upcoming years.

As we move forward with these and other efforts, we will continue to keep you updated via the NOAA Burnout Resources website and other communications. We also want to continue to hear from you and we have created a [suggestion box](#) for you to provide ongoing feedback and additional ideas to reduce burnout in NOAA.

I know that you are deeply committed to NOAA's mission and I am committed to ensuring that you are able to do so in a more equitable, healthy, and sustainable way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Rich", written in a cursive style.

Richard W. Spinrad, Ph.D.

Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere  
and NOAA Administrator