There are occasions in the life of a professional organization such as the American Meteorological Society when decisions made in the governmental or political arena strike close to the heart of the profession. Then the society has an obligation to speak out in a responsible way, after having determined as best it can the facts in the matter. Hopefully this may exert some influence for the good on the decision makers, and it may help the members of the society directly involved by steering them in the best direction.

Such an opportunity has arisen recently in connection with the State Climatologist Program of the National Weather Service (NWS), a venerable program that has played a useful role in more than half of the states by providing climatological information for a variety of agricultural, business, and government “customers.” I believe that the story of the AMS response to NOAA’s decision to discontinue this program deserves to be told, since there are some lessons to be learned that future generations of AMS officers should not forget.

At the AMS Annual Meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida, last January the Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Dr. Robert M. White, reported (among other things) that this decision to discontinue the State Climatologist Program at the end of the fiscal year had been made. He pointed out that this was necessary because of the tight budget that NOAA was facing next year, and expressed the hope and expectation that many of the states that have benefitted from this program would continue it under their own aegis.

This announcement was greeted with some dismay, a reaction that extended well beyond the small group whose jobs were threatened. It was felt by many that agriculture and business interests would be affected by the discontinuance of this service, and that the federal government should continue to run it as it had for many years.

The AMS Committee on Agricultural and Forest Meteorology was quick to respond to this announcement, and in early February, at the initiative of the Vice-Chairman, Prof. Robert F. Dale, prepared a detailed and hard hitting report protesting this move, entitled “The Need for Continuing State Climatology Services as a Function of the National Weather Service.” The Committee Chairman, Prof. Kenneth R. Knoerr, forwarded this report to me as the AMS President with the request that the Executive Committee and the Committee on Public Policy give the statement their most thoughtful attention, and expressed the hope “that this statement may form the basis for a public statement by the AMS supporting the continuation of the program in the NWS.”

The Executive Committee did consider this situation, and decided that the AMS should do two constructive things: first, it was agreed that I would consult personally and in writing with Dr. White to ask that this decision be reconsidered in the light of the AMS Committee report; and, second, I would at the same time write to the governor of each State (and territory) and urge that steps be taken immediately to assure that some such service would continue to be provided in his state. My letter would serve to complement a letter that was being prepared by Dr. White that carried the same general message to the governors. (There did not seem to be any point in delaying the second step until a formal reply was received from NOAA, since time was of the essence with the end of the fiscal year fast approaching, and I was told informally by Dr. White that it was highly unlikely that NOAA would be able to reverse this decision.)

Notice that we did not do one of the things requested by the Committee on Agricultural and Forest Meteorology, namely, issue a public statement on behalf of the AMS supporting the continuation of the Program in the NWS. There were two reasons for this: first, it would have put us in the role of trying to influence the Federal Government to change its mind in a matter that involved some difficult choices between several alternatives for saving money (all probably undesirable from our standpoint); and, second and perhaps more important, it would be of little help to NOAA to demand a reinstatement of one program without recommending which other program should be sacrificed—and that we were obviously not in a position to do.

I will not recount here all the correspondence that ensued. The record should show, however, the reply I received from Dr. White to my letter urging a reconsideration of the NOAA decision. It is reproduced below.

The replies from the state (and territory) governors...
to my letter calling each one's attention to this critical situation in his or her state, and urging "that your state government move quickly to make sure that these services continue to be available to the many organizations and individuals who have come to depend on it," were remarkably varied. In my letter it was suggested that there were a number of avenues open to the state, including putting a climatologist on the state payroll, hiring a meteorologist consulting firm, or turning to one of the universities in the state. The states were invited to ask the AMS for advice if they needed it.

Several governors replied rather promptly that steps had been taken with one of their state universities to continue the State Climatologist Program (or its equivalent), a good many said that they were seriously considering the alternatives open to them but could not yet say what action would be taken, and a handful were frankly doubtful that anything could or would be done about the situation by the state. Subsequent to these responses to me a good many more states did in fact take some positive action, and I am happy to report that an informal count reveals that about one-third of the states that had State Climatologists have already moved vigorously to preserve the function. More will probably do so in the next few months. We expect that NOAA will be able to make a more definitive survey of what took place in each state and that this can be reported in the BULLETIN later in the year.

We are most gratified that so many of the states have decided to continue a service that has been provided so long and well by the NWS, and we hope that by our speaking up at the right time the AMS strengthened these states in their resolve to put their own resources into it. Of course, as Dr. White said in his letter to us, NOAA has done all in its power to make the transition easier for those who wanted the service continued.

That letter appears below.

Dr. William W. Kellogg
President, American Meteorological Society
45 Beacon Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02108

Dear Will:

This is in response to your letter of March 6, 1973 concerning the State Climatologist program.

The important role performed over the years by the State Climatologists is certainly recognized and fully appreciated. However, the resources now available to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are extremely limited. The need to hold Federal spending within strict limits has been emphasized by the President.

Other important programs, including part of our air pollution meteorological support program, are being curtailed to enable us to live within our budgetary and personnel allowances and to permit further progress on high priority efforts such as those directed at improving disaster warning and community preparedness. These efforts require strengthening of our forecast organization; maintaining our community preparedness work by helping communities plan for emergency actions when faced with warnings of impending severe weather and floods; maintaining, and in some cases, replacing our weather radar equipment; procuring and installing additional flash flood alarm systems; and improving our capability to obtain and disseminate satellite weather information and apply it particularly to severe weather situations.

I appreciate the arguments offered in the statement of the AMS Committee on Agricultural and Forest Meteorology and in the letter from Dr. George G. Olson of Colorado State University. The questions posed are, of course, quite valid, and we are attempting to find solutions to these problems. Some of the more important State Climatologist functions, but not the consultative assistance formerly provided, will be continued by reassignment to other National Weather Service offices. For example, basic meteorological data and summaries for weekly weather and crop reports are expected to become the responsibility of Weather Service Forecast Offices. Climatological data summaries will be provided by the National Climatic Center. Climatic summaries for the County Soil Survey Reports, which are used for land value appraisals, must now be prepared by State professional staffs or by private consultants.

Many States have previously recognized the problems of applying meteorological data to numerous local endeavors and have hired professional staffs to work with our State Climatologists. In these states, I have no doubt that important work will continue without Federal support. Where a local institution such as a State University has agreed to keep local records intact as a file, we will not withdraw them. A number of universities are planning to keep such files. Many of the needs of individual or low budget researchers can be met from these data sources.

Degree-day normals and probabilities based on past data will be developed by the National Climatic Center at Asheville. Popular articles including meteorological information can be provided by many non-Federal sources. In the collection, verification and publication of severe storm data, Weather Service Offices will send out questionnaires to their respective areas of county responsibility and Weather Service Forecast Offices will prepare monthly summaries. We expect that States, where sufficiently concerned, will provide continuing support for climatology for their respective areas. For more than a decade the Federal Government has made a substantial contribution to the States in the applications of climatology. Now that the course has been charted, others may follow as the demand requires. Of course, the extensive climatological data at the National Climatic Center at Asheville will continue to be accessible as a data source.

The move to curtail the State Climatologist service was made with great reluctance. Obviously, no one should expect that the same level of services previously provided by State Climatologists will continue to be available. As we have described, however, many of these service activities will be assumed by Weather Service Forecast Offices, Weather Service Offices, and the National Climatic Center.

Sincerely,
Robert M. White
Administrator