

# We'd like to forecast an end to the sequester

By David Lias

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It's difficult to watch helplessly as fellow citizens suffer injury, death and loss.

Once again, the nation has to grapple with the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people as a steady dose of news reports chronicle the destruction in Moore, OK after a huge tornado roared through that city on Monday.

There's not much we can do when it comes to reigning in Mother Nature. The suffering currently taking place in Oklahoma, however, should give us all pause and a reason to reconsider a manufactured crisis that hit our country in March – namely, the sequester.

It's a man-made disaster with a not-so-complex solution if you throw in a bit of hard work and compromise on the part of our political leaders.

Democrats, lead by President Obama, hoped public opinion would be enough to sway Congress to act before the sequester took effect. The president and others of his party warned of the consequences of the rather mindless cuts that eventually kicked in on March 1.

Republicans countered that, well, it's only an \$85 billion cut. It's not so bad.

And the American people's reaction has mostly been: meh.

The sequester cuts were designed to be so undesirable that they virtually guaranteed that Congress and the White House would come up with an alternate agreement. But the reality is that public pressure simply hasn't reached the point to bring government leaders back to the table to try to solve our nation's budget problems.

During the past few years our country has experienced a record number of billion-dollar weather cataclysms – the most recent being Hurricane Sandy and this week's Oklahoma tornado.

At the same time, the National Weather Service remains a perennial target for budget cuts and already has nearly a 10 percent employment vacancy rate – and those realities may be damaging its long-term ability to warn the public about severe weather events. As the *Washington Post* reports:

"The cash-strapped National Weather Service is facing increasing scrutiny over its inferior computer modeling power compared to international peers and is anticipating a likely gap in weather satellite coverage. Last week, the Government Accountability Office ranked the pending satellite gap among the top 30 threats facing the federal government.

The Department of Commerce warned that not only will the loss of satellite data and imagery



diminish the quality of forecasts, but so will other important weather data surrendered by spending cuts."

The above sounds like, well, government babble that the public easily dismisses. It's difficult for the private sector to sympathize with hardships that may befall a government agency. Our immediate reaction is to simply state, "We've had to deal with cuts in our personal budgets for years now. Time for you to deal with cuts, too."

Dismissing government warnings of the effects of budget cuts may give us a warm, fuzzy feeling as we imagine some entity having to do some belt-tightening just as we have.

Those good feelings, however, may not last long. Those cuts to the National Weather Service? Well, there's really not much good about them. Check out what the president of the American Meteorological Society says it means in practice:

"The public may take

for granted a tornado warning or satellite loop of an approaching hurricane. Likewise, the public probably just assumes that they will have 5- to 9-day warning of storms like Sandy; 15 to 60 minutes lead time for tornadic storms approaching their home; an airline with appropriate data for safe air travel; or a military with reliable information to avoid hazardous weather on a mission protecting our freedom. However, these capabilities "can" and "will" worsen/degrade if we cut weather balloon launches, cut investments in the latest computing technology for our models, reduce Doppler radar maintenance, delay satellite launches, or shatter employee morale ... I am honestly concerned that we will regress in capability and this will jeopardize lives, property, and our security."

We fear that government leaders,

entrenched in their my-way-or-the-highway approach to budgeting, will ignore the consequences of their own actions.

They will cite the problems previous flat budgets have already created to call for a wholesale elimination of the National Weather Service. It's a classic self-fulfilling bit of bad government logic: Ignore the positive work an agency does, keep the agency's budget flat so that its capabilities do not keep up with the times, then cite the agency's reduced capabilities as justification to keep cutting it.

We hope the devastation in Oklahoma City will serve as a reminder of why that's the wrong path. After all, the weather service's forecasting and warning systems currently in place all worked as well as possible this week, and yet we are reminded of how bad things can be even with ample warning to the public.

At the same time, we

should all remain painfully aware of how much worse things could be if the sequester and other budget cuts begin to damage our weather forecasting capabilities.

It's time for Congress and the White House to solve this problem, and many more that are lurking when we, simply out of ideological differences, purposely decide to jeopardize our infrastructure. It's time to stop needlessly inviting unnecessary and tragic consequences to eventually befall our country. It's time to end the sequester.

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