

‘That’s Not Happening’: Meteorologist Fact-Checks Claim The Shutdown Is Making Weather Forecasts Worse

Michael Bastasch

January 7, 2019

Meteorologist and Cato Institute adjunct scholar Ryan Maue says he sees no evidence the government shutdown is crippling the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) premier weather model.

“I do not find evidence (as of yet) for this claim in my verification statistics for the NOAA global weather model,” Maue tweeted Monday, referring to a Washington Post story claiming “your forecast is worse because of the shutdown.”

The Post’s Capital Weather Gang reported Monday the government shutdown over border wall funding is impacting the National Weather Service (NWS), including the forecasting ability of the federal government’s flagship weather model.

The “current Global Forecast System — or the GFS — the United States’ premier weather model, is running poorly, and there’s no one on duty to fix it,” the Post reported. GFS model accuracy dropped out around Christmas and hasn’t kept pace with other weather models, the paper claimed.

“There was a dropout in the scores for all of the systems on Dec. 25,” Suru Saha with the Environmental Modeling Center told The Post. “All of the models recovered, except for the GFS, which is still running at the bottom of the pack.”

This isn’t the first time The Post targeted the Trump administration’s handling of NWS. The paper, without evidence, ran a 2017 article claiming the administration’s hiring freeze “shrunk National Weather Service staff before hurricanes hit.”

An NWS spokesperson told The Post that essential “staff continue mission-essential functions,” but Saha said model deterioration could hamper transportation, emergency planning and even national security.

“Once the GFS scores start to go bad, it impacts everything,” Saha said. “Things are going to break, and that really worries me because this is our job. We are supposed to improve our weather forecasts, not deteriorate them.”

However, Maue examined the data and came to the opposite conclusion — there’s no evidence GFS is doing any worse because of the government shutdown.

Weather forecasters have long considered it second-rate compared to the European weather model. For example, the European model was much more accurate in predicting Hurricane Matthew and a Seattle-area windstorm in 2016.

“So far, the NOAA weather model seems to be humming along as normal – that means ‘second rate’ and in third place behind the world’s best weather models,” Maue tweeted. “While problems could arise at any time — the model breaking — so far, that’s NOT happening.”