

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps Amendments Act of 2019



Left: NOAA Corps aviators prepare for a mission to collect hurricane data in NOAA's Gulfstream IV-SP.

Right: NOAA Corps officer candidates stand watch on a training cruise with their U.S. Coast Guard counterparts on the bridge of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Eagle.

Background

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps (NOAA Corps), under the U.S. Department of Commerce, is the smallest of the seven U.S. uniformed services, and recently celebrated its 100th birthday in 2017, but trace their roots even farther (1807) as direct descendants of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, the oldest scientific agency in the U.S. federal government. These officers have served in both World Wars, serving as surveyors, hydrographers, and engineers. Today's NOAA Corps provides a cadre of professionals trained in engineering, earth sciences, oceanography, meteorology, fisheries science, and other related disciplines. The 321 officers of the NOAA Corps make up only about three percent of NOAA's personnel, but as the operators of NOAA's ship and aircraft fleet, they are the operational heart of the agency. Their unique combination of scientific and operational expertise coupled with a high degree of flexibility and deployability allow them to serve throughout the Agency's line and staff offices and support nearly all of NOAA's missions and programs on behalf of the Nation.

Need for Legislation

Like other Uniformed Services, NOAA Corps officers spend much of their careers away from family and friends at sea, in the air, or in remote locations, deployed up to nine months a year. Unlike other services, there is no administrative, support, or 'desk job' career track — all officers receive operational assignments on deployed ships and aircraft throughout their careers. NOAA Corps officers also work regularly with other services, commanding Navy underwater unmanned vehicle platoons and training with Navy scientific aircraft squadrons. The Corps and the United States Coast Guard (USCG) now conduct joint Officer Candidate School classes at the USCG Academy in New London, Connecticut.

NOAA Corps officers receive the same pay and hold rank equal to officers in the Navy and Coast Guard and may be called upon to serve in the Armed Forces during times of war or national emergency, but lack some of the statutory authorities, benefits, and obligations of other uniformed services. Because of the NOAA Corps' small size, they are often overlooked in the legislative process, resulting in a patchwork of authorities and benefits for members.

The NOAA Corps Amendments Act Improves Parity with other Uniformed Services for:

Employment rights: NOAA Corps officers are not currently considered preference eligible for the purposes of competitive service under title 5 even if they are rated over 30 percent disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs. They are also not included in a definition of uniformed services for the purposes of employment and reemployment rights in title 38. This bill:

- Makes NOAA Corps officers who served under honorable conditions for at least 3 years eligible for appointment in competitive service positions.
- Allows former NOAA Corps officers to compete for career-conditional positions limited to individuals currently employed within NOAA, allowing NOAA and the Nation to retain their skills and expertise in the Federal Government.

Recruitment, diversity, and retention: The other Uniformed Services and the private sector have many incentive programs for students with science or engineering backgrounds, making it hard for the NOAA Corps to compete for desirable candidates. Other services also offer incentives to retain high performing officers and improve work-life balance. This bill:

- Authorizes education loan and interest payment financial assistance for officers.
- Authorizes a pre-commissioning program to provide financial assistance to support tuition for prospective officer candidates in exchange for an obligated term of service, with authority to prioritize students of minority-serving institutions.
- Authorizes family programs, mental health resources, and voluntary services such as the implementation of an Ombudsman program to improve communication between members' families and the service.
- Allows officers to temporarily separate without pay to focus on personal and family obligations.
- Provides accession bonuses for officers with critical skills.

Good governance: The Secretary of Commerce lacks some statutory authorities held by other Secretaries to manage the size and composition of the Corps. This bill:

- Authorizes the Secretary to set the number of Corps officers annually up to 500 to allow for the Agency to react to emerging needs.
- Authorizes the Secretary to better manage the grade distribution of the Corps, allowing for a more robust NOAA Corps.
- Creates an officer candidate rank at reduced pay (equivalent to enlisted grade E-5) similar to other services for officers in basic training.
- Holds NOAA Corps officers to an obligated term of service.
- Authorizes the Secretary to appoint officers directly from U.S. military service academies and maritime service academies.