

There's Much to Be Desired in Weather Forecasting

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As far as we are aware, no politician ever has been elected to public office on a platform promising better weather for everyone.

It might be a good gimmick if someone could get a handle on it, but weather forecasting and control seem to be outside the precincts of petty politics. Candidates may fearlessly declare "It's a nice day!" but they don't publish political polls on weather trends.

A dozen or more federal agencies are involved in weather research, reporting or boondoggling, but "the state of the art," as meteorologists say, still leaves room for much improvement in weather services.

That could be why the U.S. Department of Commerce has proposed to sell its weather satellites to private companies and farmers. They require appropriations and don't seem to be winning many votes.

The proposal immediately aroused reaction from bureaucrats, meteorologists, farm organizations and the media. A state weather offi-

cial was quoted as saying "the profit motive in private industry may result in less efficient weather service for the public."

The president of the Oklahoma Wheat Growers Association said he didn't think farmers would be hurt because they get weather reports from newspapers and television. An Oklahoma Farm Bureau spokesman said farmers might be hurt if they had to pay for weather forecasts.

When this writer was editor of The Farmer-Stockman magazine 40 years ago, readers told us they wanted a "long range weather forecast." Newspaper editors had known for decades that weather was

Page One News. We wrote the chief of what was then the U.S. Weather Bureau in Washington to ask for a long-range forecast. He replied none was available but he offered to send advance reports on what the weather was in Oklahoma for the same month the previous year. Farmers could make their own weather predictions from that, he

implied.

That didn't fill the bill, but it was only after World War II that we located Dr. Irving P. Krick, who had successfully predicted weather for military operations in Europe, including the Normandy invasion. For a fee he supplied long-range predictions with acceptable reliability.

Since then nearly all farm publications have added long-range forecasts by private firms. When television came along, it began to feature weather, sometimes as news and sometimes as entertainment but always with audience ratings in mind. Without the communications media, Uncle Sam would have to spend a lot of money dispensing weather data.

In turn, the media all rely upon federal agencies to gather weather data and supply it to them at little or no cost. Even if they have radar and rain gauges of their own they need outside reports.

Quite a number of private weather forecasting firms supply predictions privately to businesses whose successes or falls with seasonal weather conditions. They need to know in advance what's coming.

Forecasters can identify with considerable certainty a major blizzard roaring down out of Canada into the Rocky Mountains, but they often can't tell whether a front of moist air blowing up from the Gulf of Mexico will release enough rain to break an Oklahoma drought.

Many private weather firms and TV stations feed weather records and prevailing conditions into computers, obtaining "weather probabilities" by punching buttons. Like those playing slot machines in Las Vegas, they sometimes hit the jackpot but not always.

It is easy to place too much reliance upon forecasts. The National Severe Storm Laboratory at Norman, with a large staff engaged in weather research, is regarded by many as a reliable data source.

Yet, in a nationally

syndicated story by Christian Williams of The Washington Post published about three months ago, the head of this agency was quoted as saying: "There is a limit to the prediction of highly localized storms, for which you have to use common sense. It's still necessary sometimes to look out the window." He also advised that if you see a tornado coming, use your legs and feet.

One element remains unclear regarding the government's proposal to sell some weather services. That is whether

anybody wants to buy them. It might be less risky to invest in wildcat oil wells.

No matter who makes the predictions, it appears that the "Real Weather Man" doesn't read newspaper forecasts or listen to TV shows.