NWS-CR-TA-86-7

CRH SSD
MARCH 1986

CENTRAL REGION TECHNICAL ATTACHMENT 86-7

FAMILY OF SERVICES FACTS SHEET

Communications Division
National Weather Service
Silver Spring, Maryland

The National Weather Service (NWS) operates a Family of Services (FOS) to make weather information available to the private sector. The FOS, which is in its third year of operation, consists of four medium-speed circuits called the Public Product Service (PPS), the Domestic Data Service (DDS), the International Data Service (IDS), and the Numerical Product Service (NPS). There are now 23 FOS subscribers, eight of which subscribe to more than one of the services.

The NWS does not normally "suggest" that a potential user subscribe to a particular service of the FOS. We discuss the products available on each of the services and furnish the interested party a FOS Users Guide brochure and a current list of subscribers. The prospective user can then shop around among the weather information service companies that are FOS subscribers, compare costs and services with FOS costs and services, and select the most economical and efficient way to meet his or her needs.

The FOS was designed as a replacement for older services such as Service A, C, and O, RAWARC, and other teletypewriter circuits that formerly carried weather data. No one service can carry all of this information. The four new services were designed to serve various users' needs.

Initially, there was some duplication of products on the PPS and the DDS. Experience showed that the DDS was overloaded. In 1985, there were several cases during inclement weather situations when the DDS developed a backlog of over two hours. In those cases, the responsible NWS official directed that the backlogged data be discarded in order to move current information. The majority of the subscribers applauded the decision and suggested that the DDS menu be revised to achieve more timely transmission of data and information.

The NWS reviewed the DDS menu and proposed to realign the menu in three phases. Phase one discontinues the relay of weather watches, warnings, and severe weather statements on the DDS since they are available on the PPS in timely fashion. Phase two will discontinue relay of the remaining public products on the DDS that are duplicated on the PPS. Phase three will add some products to the DDS that are not presently relayed to any of the FOS circuits.

There is a FOS Subscribers Working Group consisting of eight members. The Group serves in an advisory capacity to NWS management and as liaison between the NWS and the user community. The Group monitors user response to the operation of the FOS and passes complaints and recommendations to the NWS that represent a consensus of user opinion.

There is also a FOS Internal Review Committee consisting of five NWS members. The Committee monitors the FOS operation to ensure operational integrity and makes changes intended to provide the most efficient and effective means of meeting the total user requirement. FOS subscribers sign an agreement with the NWS which includes a statement that responsibility for all aspects of FOS management, including menus for the services, lies with the NWS and that decisions may be made on a unilateral basis. This is rarely done in actual practice.

The FOS Subscribers Working Group meets with the FOS Internal Review Committee periodically to discuss FOS operations, user satisfaction, user complaints, suggested changes, and future operations. Annually, the NWS meets with all subscribers to obtain their reaction to major proposed changes. User satisfaction and user complaints are of special interest to the NWS in the evaluation and planning processes.

The NWS counsels FOS subscribers that severe weather information originates on NOAA Weather Wire Service (NWWS) circuits which serve to make weather watches, warnings, etc., available to civil defense authorities, disaster preparedness organizations, the media, and other entities involved in warning the general public. Because of increased costs of land-line communications and the need for faster data transmission, the NWWS is now being reconfigured. The new NWWS is expected to serve the users better because it will become a national system and information will be available by area of interest rather than limited by state boundaries. The current NWWS and the NWWS of the future should continue to be regarded by public service users as the primary source of time-critical information for public warning services.

Subscribers to the FOS pay a one-time connection fee and an annual maintenance fee to the NWS. These fees partially offset the cost to the Government of operating the FOS and are in addition to the communications costs billed to subscribers by the communications carrier. While the NWS is, therefore, sensitive to the opinions and problems of our subscribers, we are also interested in those of second-tier users. We encourage them to make their views known to their weather information service companies for consideration. The companies tend to gear their offerings to meet the requirements of the bulk of their customers. The NWS strives to provide the best possible service to FOS subscribers.