

With climate legislation stalled and probably dead until the archaic and dysfunctional filibuster rule can be changed, the Obama Administration is moving forward with positive baby steps. Yesterday, the Commerce Department [announced the creation](#) of a Climate Service within the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration:

The proposed entity would provide “user-friendly” information to help governments and businesses adapt to climate change, creating a central federal source of information on everything from projections of sea level rise to maps of the nation’s best sites for wind and solar power...

Just as NOAA’s National Weather Service provides information on short-range environmental conditions, the proposed climate service will provide long-term projections of how climate will change.

All well and good. Unless you are Sarah Palin, you believe that more information about critical scientific issues is important.

But the announcement raises one important question: what in the world is this thing doing in the Commerce Department? For that matter, what is NOAA doing in the Commerce Department?

You’ve got to give Commerce Secretary Gary Locke credit for trying:

“If you own a ski resort, you’re might be wondering, do you expand or not expand? What’s the impact of climate change on weather patterns at a certain elevation where your ski resort is?” he said. “Some people will take this information to the private sector and focus just on ski resorts.”

Well, all right: but the fact of the matter is that oceans and the atmosphere have now become critical environmental and scientific issues. That means that NOAA probably belongs in EPA, or maybe Interior.

As [Holly pointed out](#) a few days ago, NOAA doesn’t even have a statutory basis, and it won’t after this session because of the inevitable Republican filibuster of legislative attempts to give it one. So moving it is a snap.

This isn't just about moving boxes around: it makes longer term policy sense. The best way to hamper government agencies is to split them up: as Terry Moe pointed out in [a classic article](#) two decades ago, business interests were able to hamstring the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) by forcing it to rely on health and morbidity estimates from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOS), which was placed at HEW. This effectively prevented the Labor secretary from advancing OSHA policy on her own — she had to rely on action from HEW, and the HEW Secretary might have her own agenda. This bred policy incoherence — which was exactly the point. As climate policy becomes more critical, we should try avoid past mistakes.

Moreover, [Commerce is the smallest agency](#) in the Federal Government: at an annual budget of 6-7 billion dollars, the whole agency would be a rounding error at the Pentagon. That means it has little political clout — a point that is obvious if you realize that Commerce Secretaries have had made virtually no policy impact during the century-long history of the Department.

Finally, Commerce Secretaries aren't going to be very focused on the goings on at NOAA: they will care about business junkets and such. This happens every now and then to agencies: the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division of the Treasury Department was given the gun portfolio in 1968, became the Bureau of Alcohol, tobacco, and Firearms, and sat there in the Treasury for more than three decades before moving to Homeland Security. (Even then, it should probably be at Justice, but FBI, whose officials hate it, would protest.)

So it's a good thing that the administration is moving in this small but positive way — but let's give the baby a good home.