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PNSWSH

Public Information Statement 22-17 Updated
National Weather Service Headquarters Silver Spring MD
320 PM EDT Tue Aug 9 2022

To: Subscribers:
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 -Emergency Manager Weather Information Network
 -NOAAPort
 Other NWS Partners, Users and Employees

From: Ajay Mehta
 Director, Office of Observations

Subject: Updated: Changes in Weather Balloon Launch Frequency on August 9, 2022

Updated to reflect the status of the supply chain disruption of helium and temporary issue with the hydrogen supply contract for our Eastern Region sites that necessitated a reduction in the frequency of weather balloon launches at some upper air locations in the United States.

The March 29, 2022 Public Information Statement (PNS) informed customers of a reduction in the frequency of weather balloon launches at some upper air locations in the United States due to a supply chain disruption of helium and a temporary issue with the hydrogen supply contract for our Eastern Region sites. As of August 9, 2022, the helium supply issue is ongoing. The number of affected sites changes monthly as helium shipments arrive at some locations and others run out of helium before their restock arrives. Four of the 12 sites that use helium to inflate weather balloons are affected, including Albany, NY (ALY), Tallahassee, FL (TAE), New York, NY (OKX) and the upper air site at the Denver, CO Airport (KDNR), which uses a contract observer to inflate and launch the balloons. Due to the helium supply disruption at KDNR, the contractor issued a stop-work order for 90 days, thus suspending the ability for that site to launch weather balloons until mid-October. The NWS is working to find a permanent solution for the issues associated with the KDNR site, including investigating alternative sites to conduct operations.

The hydrogen supply contract issue was resolved in April 2022 and those sites in our Eastern region that use hydrogen have been operating normally with no further disruption in weather balloon launches.

To mitigate adverse effects on forecasts, affected sites conserve helium for critical weather days where possible, when balloon launches resume to support weather forecasts and warnings. To mitigate the data gap, these sites benefit from data collected by balloons launched from neighboring upper air sites. In addition, redundancy in the observing system allows for the use of direct, in situ data collected from commercial aircraft in weather forecast models.

Because of the vital importance of upper air data collected by weather balloons, we have been doing everything possible within our control to resolve helium supply issues. Additionally, we are actively working to convert more helium sites to hydrogen, where locations, leases and safe operations allow, and as funding becomes available.

Upper air sites that still use helium include: Albany, NY; Caribou, ME; Upton, NY; Wallops Island, VA; Greensboro, NC; Charleston, SC; Key West, FL; Tallahassee, FL; Denver, CO; Salt Lake City, UT; Las Vegas, NV; Tucson, AZ. All the other U.S. upper air sites have been converted to hydrogen, which is a less expensive and more reliable option.

Radiosondes are instruments attached to weather balloons that send back a wide range of upper atmospheric data to support weather forecasts, including temperature, dew point, relative humidity, barometric pressure, wind speed, wind direction. Radiosondes are one of many technologies that collect earth observation data for use in weather modeling and forecasting. Data is also collected from instruments aboard commercial aircraft, surface observing stations, satellites, radars and buoys.

If you or your organization have any questions about these changes, please contact:

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