Shutdown stops long-planned UW research flight to Arctic

Atmospheric researchers fret losing a NOAA flight booked two years in advance, while elsewhere in the city, port cargo keeps flowing through customs and Head Start programs stay open.

By Bill Lucia

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At least two University of Washington research missions in Alaska — one involving an airplane booked two years in advance — could be on ice if the federal government shutdown doesn’t end soon. The atmospheric science program that is conducting the research is also trying to figure out how to accommodate about 50 employees who are locked-out of their offices at NOAA facilities.

Roughly 50,000 federal employees in Washington were furloughed on Tuesday, when the federal government shut down. The closure stems from a recalcitrant dispute in Congress over a spending bill.

In spite of the shutdown and the widespread furloughs, import and export cargo is flowing smoothly through customs at the Port of Seattle and local Head Start Programs are funded through at least the end of October. The closure is, however, threatening to monkey wrench two research projects at the UW’s Joint Institute for the Study of the Atmosphere and Ocean.

In a flight scheduled two years ago, a NOAA operated Lockheed WP-3D aircraft was supposed to take off Thursday on a mission to collect Arctic Ocean sea-ice data, off the north coast of Alaska, for researchers at the institute. The flights are hard to come by, according to the director of the institute, Professor Thomas Ackerman. The plane will fly this weekend if the government reopens by then, but Ackerman said if the flight is pushed beyond the next two weeks, it will probably be canceled. “The odds are very good we will not get the airplane next year,” he said. In that case, the experiment, which is related to the atmospheric effects of decreasing ice coverage in the Arctic, might not happen.

Ackerman also said that NOAA’s research ship Oscar Dyson was scheduled to pick up six ocean research buoys that were recording data in the Gulf of Alaska. Because of the shutdown, the vessel returned to a port on the island of Kodiak, off the state’s southern coast. If the boat doesn’t go back out to sea in the next few weeks, Ackerman said the institute would have to charter a vessel, at a cost of $60,000, to retrieve the buoys. If left at sea over the winter the buoys would likely be destroyed by storms.

Referring to research flights and vessels, Ackerman said, “We have those resources chartered out years in advance, because lots of people want to use them and you have to take your turn.”

As the Alaskan scheduling snafus unfolded, about 50 of the institute’s 80 employees were without offices, after the NOAA facilities where they work closed down. “If you can’t get to your laboratory, you can’t do your job,” Ackerman said. “We can’t not pay these people, we can’t furlough them or lay them off.” For the time being, the refugee researchers are “camped out in other people’s offices” at the UW.

Elsewhere in the city, the effects of the shutdown were less immediate. “Seems to be business as usual,” said Sandy Saylor, a dispatcher at MacMillan-Piper, a freight company, which moves
between 150 and 250 imported and exported shipping containers to and from the Port of Seattle each day. U.S. Customs and Border Protection issued a statement on Tuesday saying that the shutdown would have only minimal impacts on cargo and passenger processing at Sea-Tac Airport, the Port of Seattle and the Port of Tacoma.

If the shutdown continues until the end of the month, Head Start programs at the Denise Louie Education Center will be imperiled. Federal Head Start funding for the center expires on Oct. 31. “If they don’t figure something out by then we will be closed,” Executive Director Janice Deguchi said. Head Start provides education, health and nutrition services to 3- to 5-year old children from low-income families. Denise Louie has 241 students and 65 staff at three locations in Seattle.

Two other Head Start programs in Seattle are in better shape. Funding for Neighborhood House Head Start will continue through Dec. 31, according Mark Okazaki, the program’s Executive Director. And Theresa Whipple, a spokesperson for Seattle Public Schools, said the district's Head Start program was fully funded through Nov. 1. She added that Seattle Public Schools fronts the money for Head Start and is then reimbursed by the federal government, which means the program shouldn’t be in any near-term financial danger.

**UW Medicine researchers are also sweating** the potential damage a prolonged shutdown could inflict on their work. “Our salaries are either 90 or 100 percent derived from NIH funding,” said Dr. Nora Disis, a professor in the Division of Medical Oncology, referring to the National Institute of Health. About 40 staff and students work in the lab Disis runs and she explained that most of the money that funds her cancer research comes from NIH grants that are delivered in blocks. If a grant runs out during the shutdown, the research it funds would halt.

“Right now, none of our work has been affected,” she said, adding that she and her staff were trying to determine whether any blocks of NIH grant money would be used-up in the near future. Disis said if NIH funding-installments are disrupted, some research might have to stop. As an example she described a project that administered monthly immunizations to patients who’d had ovarian cancer. If those treatments are delayed, the study could be ruined. She said, “You could talk about a year, or two years worth of work just devastated.”

_Bill Lucia will receive his Masters of Public Administration from the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs in December. He worked in the film and TV business in New York City and for a microfinance nonprofit in Nigeria, before moving to Seattle two years ago to attend graduate school at the UW._

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