

US Senator Maria Cantwell

Face the Nation

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[VIDEO SEGMENT 1] [VIDEO SEGMENT 2]

Margaret Brennan: And we're joined now by Senator Maria Cantwell, who is the top Democrat on the Commerce Committee, which has oversight of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, and the National Weather Service. Good morning, Senator.

Sen. Cantwell: Good morning.

Margaret Brennan: These agencies are being looked at carefully right now, as you know. Just this morning in Texas, we are seeing the National Weather Service issue another flash flood warning for that very same part of Central Texas, Kerrville. In fact, the ground search for victims had to be halted because of this warning. There has been so much scrutiny of what went wrong or what more could have been done. In your view, at the federal level, is the National Weather Service doing everything it should be doing?

Sen. Cantwell: You mean, at this moment?

Margaret Brennan: Did it function as intended?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I think what, what's happening here -- and we need to take a pause, glad the President and First Lady went and definitely there's a lot of things being said, but what the real question is, is, what can we do to improve the weather forecasting of this nation, to use science, to use better assets, to really do once in a lifetime investment, to upgrade the system so that we could have given people in Kerrville more time, more warning, and the same for tornadoes and hurricanes and fires. And so I think what we're learning is that in this last week, we've had four events that have all broken huge records for weather and precipitation. That means more flooding. So we know now we're having more extreme weather. What is our response to that? To make sure we never have another Kerrville again.

Margaret Brennan: So more extreme weather, more stresses on the system. At the same time, you have the Trump administration at least proposing that they're going to do a 27% budget cut to NOAA. The Commerce Secretary, though, said he's not going to touch public forecasting. We've seen, though, on the Democratic side, leader Schumer say there should be an investigation about whether staff cuts, for example, led to or contributed to the Texas disaster. Are Democrats being too quick here to blame the politics? You're not.

Sen. Cantwell: I liked your opening story about the GAO report and saw what my colleagues presented. You know, I was on that call the day the President was shot in Butler, and I basically asked the question on the call that day, "Did you guys use drones?" There was like dead silence. So I'm glad now that GAO, a respected arm of our organization and government, is producing a

report. Do you want the same kind of report a year from now? Yes, what we want is to make sure that we understand what happened, but doing blame gaming isn't going to bring people back, but the press has every right to ask hard questions to try to figure out what do we need to do to improve weather forecasting?

Margaret Brennan: Well, I ask that because the DNC and Democratic leaders have said things like this, you're talking in substantial, specific policy language, and that's not what's coming from leadership. That's why I'm asking.

Sen. Cantwell: What's important to know is that in this particular storm, what we had is very warm surface conditions in the Gulf. That meant the storm was going to move slower. It meant it was going to drop more precipitation. We as a nation shouldn't be second to Europe or anybody in being a weather ready nation. We should be the smartest government in the world, using technology, analyzing the data and putting a forecast system into place that gives people that kind of system.

So just recently, in the Midwest, that work by NOAA and the weather forecasting system and the labs helped give information about how to get out of the way of a tornado two hours in advance, not 15 minutes or 13 minutes, but two hours.

And I'm going to send a letter to the President making five recommendations, and some of them are very bipartisan recommendations, things that Senator Cruz or Wicker or Moran support, that basically make this once in a lifetime investment. So we have the best information, the best analysis, the best people to interpret that on the ground for the local responders, and let's help Americans get out of the way of a storm.

Margaret Brennan: So on that point in your recommendations. We are still seeing a proposed budget cut. We are still seeing staff cuts, and the administration is talking about privatizing parts of NOAA. Can you do all of that and then accomplish the outcome you're asking for?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I think that's what we're going to try to draw attention to. Senator Cruz and I both support upgrading our Doppler radar system that is having a system that gives you more information about what the storm is likely to do. It's one of the reasons why Europe is a little ahead of us, and you hear about their forecasting system, is because they do more analytics around data that give them higher predictability. I think we're in the same place. Let's get the best system in the country. Senator Wicker and I support these ocean buoys. Those buoys tell you the temperature of the ocean. Why was that so important in this case? Because you needed to know that temperature tells you how much that storm might move or hold in a pattern, and how much precipitation it might move forward and dump in a community.

Margaret Brennan: And you believe this has to happen at the federal level. It's not a state led response in that way, or forecasting rather?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, this is, this is a national responsibility. And I think of you know, if you want your snow shoveled, yeah, you want the mayor to show up, but if you want accurate weather information, it's not community to community, it's a national system, and we share that

with the local people and help them best respond. And today, my state has a red flag warning out, it's right in the Seattle Times, telling the whole state very bad conditions today, very hot temperatures, very high winds. That means a fire could be explosive.

Margaret Brennan: So a lot of warning ahead of time. Let's talk more about this on the other side of this break, stay with us, if you will. We'll be right back.

SEGMENT 2

Margaret Brennan: Welcome back to Face The Nation. We return to our conversation with Senator Maria Cantwell. Just to pick up where we left off in talking about how to at least warn people further in advance of potential weather-related disasters. You know there is still no Senate confirmed head of NOAA. You did go through with a hearing on the committee very recently, and the nominee, Dr. Jacobs, told you that the main mission will still be preserved under this administration. Do you feel comfortable in the potential leadership of Dr. Jacobs? Will you vote to confirm him.

Sen. Cantwell: I haven't decided yet. I have to see for the record, he did say some very positive things that he wanted a NOAA Organic Act. He wants the Weather Act that Senator Cruz and I have proposed. He said he wanted some other resources there. I've got to drill down on exactly what he thinks is going to happen on the science mission and how we're going to preserve that, because the nation is now spending billions of dollars on storms.

In fact, Susan Collins and I had a report from GAO in the last year that showed how much we were spending on the impacts of climate and extreme weather. So the point is, it's a minuscule investment to keep some of these science research functions at NOAA to help them better prepare people for hurricanes, for tornadoes and floods. It's a minuscule amount of money, and so we want to be smarter about it, and the more you can move people and resources out of the way of a storm, the more you can predict what might happen, the better prepared we're going to be, and that's going to help us save lives and certainly save dollars.

So I want to get from him exactly how he thinks that this is going to work. But he did say some positive things about the structure. People don't understand, but NOAA is really a science arm of our government to make all of this for the nation and the [National] Weather Service. So they literally have to fund the hurricane hunters. Those are the planes that fly into a hurricane. And we've helped support that in the past in a bipartisan way. It basically funds the research that really, I think, probably where Europe is right now is they just do better analysis of the data. They're not doing anything extraordinarily better than us. They're probably just spending more time, and if that is a few million dollars and supercomputing time, we should do it.

Margaret Brennan: Speaking of Europe and the trade conversation, the President has renewed just on Saturday, saying he's going to put tariffs on the European Union and up them on on Mexico as well by August the first. There's been a lot of concern about what it would do to the economy. The stock market seems to be brushing off the impact. Out in your state, Boeing, huge contributor to the US economy, is headquartered there. In fact, they had a 27% increase in

airplane deliveries in June -- eight to China, because there's been this sort of cooling off with them. If that's on the back burner, are you less concerned about the trade war?

Sen. Cantwell: Oh no, no, no. I'm very concerned. We're in an endless summer of trade war, tariffs, and chaos. I'm very concerned about this. It is impacting our businesses. We are one of the most trade dependent states in the nation, but it's impacting our ports. I mean literally, trade with our ports is at least 20% down over last year the month of May from the previous year. The Association of Washington Businesses is releasing a study that they've previewed with us, and of their membership, 75% of them have said they already [are concerned] by the tariffs.

Margaret Brennan: About medium sized businesses, or...

Sen. Cantwell: Yes, they're probably a few would define as large, but they're saying that 30% of them are saying that they basically have already raised costs in some way, and 15% of them said we've either laid off people or are planning to lay off people in the future. So for us, we are seeing the economic impacts of this and our competitiveness, even though people have planned with storing a lot of material, getting supplies in, trying to prepare for this. This up and down is really having an effect on costs.

Margaret Brennan: So it sounds like you're saying at this point, we haven't yet seen fully or felt fully the economic impact. So for the market to be betting that the President's either going to back down or that this isn't as hurtful as some predicted, you're saying just wait and see.

Sen. Cantwell: Oh, I think the market has been very clear. When he says he's going forward with tariffs, they don't like it, and you see a drop and when he takes a pause, but that's not the issue. The issue is small businesses. [65% to 75%] of jobs are created by small businesses, and those small businesses don't have the same flexibility that a big company does to move out of the way of a supply chain that is now being disrupted. Or, you know, there was a Japanese company, big supplier to US auto manufacturers, that went [bankrupt]. So we now have aluminum prices that affect everything from our transportation infrastructure investment to -- I heard on Amazon that tea kettles went up 40% or 50% in cost. So it's affecting all sorts of products. And while we may not see all of that at this moment, I guarantee you, as the next quarter results come in, I'm sure we will see some effects of these tariffs. So let's get back to using our alliances to create -- why aren't we working with Europe right now to counter Russia, instead of being in an argument with them on some of these issues that could be resolved in a different form,

Margaret Brennan: We will see if an agreement is reached before August the first.