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Public Information Statement 22-17
National Weather Service Headquarters Silver Spring MD
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From: Michelle Mainelli
 Acting Director, Office of Observations

Subject: Changes in Weather Balloon Launch Frequency: Effective March 29, 2022

Effective March 29, 2022 and until further notice, the National Weather Service is reducing the frequency of weather balloon launches at several upper air locations in the United States due to a global supply chain disruption of helium and a temporary issue with the contract of one hydrogen supplier.

The National Weather Service launches weather balloons from 101 upper air sites throughout the United States and the Caribbean, using helium to inflate the balloons at 12 of these sites. The agency converted the remaining sites to hydrogen because it is cost effective and a more reliable gas option.

Approximately 9% of the total upper air sites are currently affected by the gas shortage and temporary contract issue, including five of the 12 helium sites and four hydrogen sites. We anticipate that these issues will impact additional upper air sites. To ensure there is enough gas on-hand to launch balloons in support of forecasts during hazardous weather, the affected sites have either reduced launches to once per day or suspended flights during calm weather days. This temporary adjustment will not impact weather forecasts and warnings. The affected sites benefit from data collected by balloons launched from neighboring upper air sites. Be assured we will take all steps possible to mitigate the supply chain and contracting issues.

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.

The National Weather Service will continue converting sites to hydrogen where locations, leases and safe operations allow, and as funding becomes available.

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

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