

NOAA Satellite Mission Remains Strong Amid COVID-19

As manager of NOAA's Wallops Command and Data Acquisition Station, one of two primary satellite downlink ground stations, my job is to lead a team that is responsible for tracking, commanding, operating, and distributing satellite data to promote and protect the nation from tornadoes, hurricanes, floods and other weather that threaten our lives and properties.

Like everyone around the world, my team of space operators, who are responsible for maintaining the facility and for controlling NOAA's fleet of sophisticated weather satellites, is dealing with the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Day-to-day, the station is guided by our vision of being one team with one goal: to be leaders in satellite ground station operations, ensuring continuous, global data access from space today and into the future. And in normal times, the operational duties of this station are difficult and stressful, but incredibly rewarding, as we ensure the U.S. receives environmental data that protects our nation's security and economy.

But these times are anything but normal, as the COVID pandemic has caused us to change how we do business. Though our goal remains, a new question arises: how do we achieve that goal under the unprecedented specter of the pandemic? A situation, which forces social distancing and other uncomfortable alterations to our daily routine.

At the time I am writing this in June 2020, we are achieving our operational goals by relying on a few key tenets that will help us stay the course in these turbulent waters. First and foremost is to closely follow the guidance provided to us by the Centers for Disease Control and NOAA leadership to ensure our employees safety. This includes social distancing, maximum telework, and limiting in-person access to the station.

In addition, all extraneous visits to the station are curtailed for the time being. Rather than bringing personnel to the station to perform work, we send equipment out for repairs in order to reduce outside personnel coming into the station. We've learned to alter our daily routine to ensure operational viability, while adhering to our pandemic guidance.

In other words, business is no longer 'as usual' and I, along with the Wallops team, are practicing flexibility in our duties to accommodate the changes in our work environment caused by the pandemic. As an example, all of our face-to-face meetings are now done through video conferencing. Surprisingly, this is bringing our team closer together with multiple different groups, as we now meet more regularly than we did in person.

And as a leader, I try to set the example by staying positive, asking everyone to rely on each other, to help one another and to stay positive during these uncertain times. By keeping these few key principles in mind, following our safety guidelines and remaining flexible, I believe we will weather this storm. These adaptations we've made will allow us to continue our space operations unabated, and to ensure continued global data access from space.

In the end, though there is a pandemic and we've changed how we do some business—Space Operations

continues, and with the dedication of the staff to the mission and doing our best to keep everyone safe during these difficult times, we will continue to keep the data flowing.

This situation forces us to forge a new operational path, which reminds me of a quote by the American poet, Muriel Strode: "...I will go where there is no path and leave a trail." We are certainly blazing a new trail to ensure we continue to deliver the mission, to chart and plan for the future, and to keep everyone safe while we do this.

July 2020, Victor Grycenkov – NOAA Federal, Manager of NOAA's Wallops Command and Data Acquisition Station