

Meteorologists are raising the alarm: Bevin's budget could put Kentuckians in danger

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Meteorologists are raising the alarm that Kentuckians could be in more danger when storms sweep through the commonwealth if a series of weather monitoring stations are lost under a budget proposal by Gov. Matt Bevin.



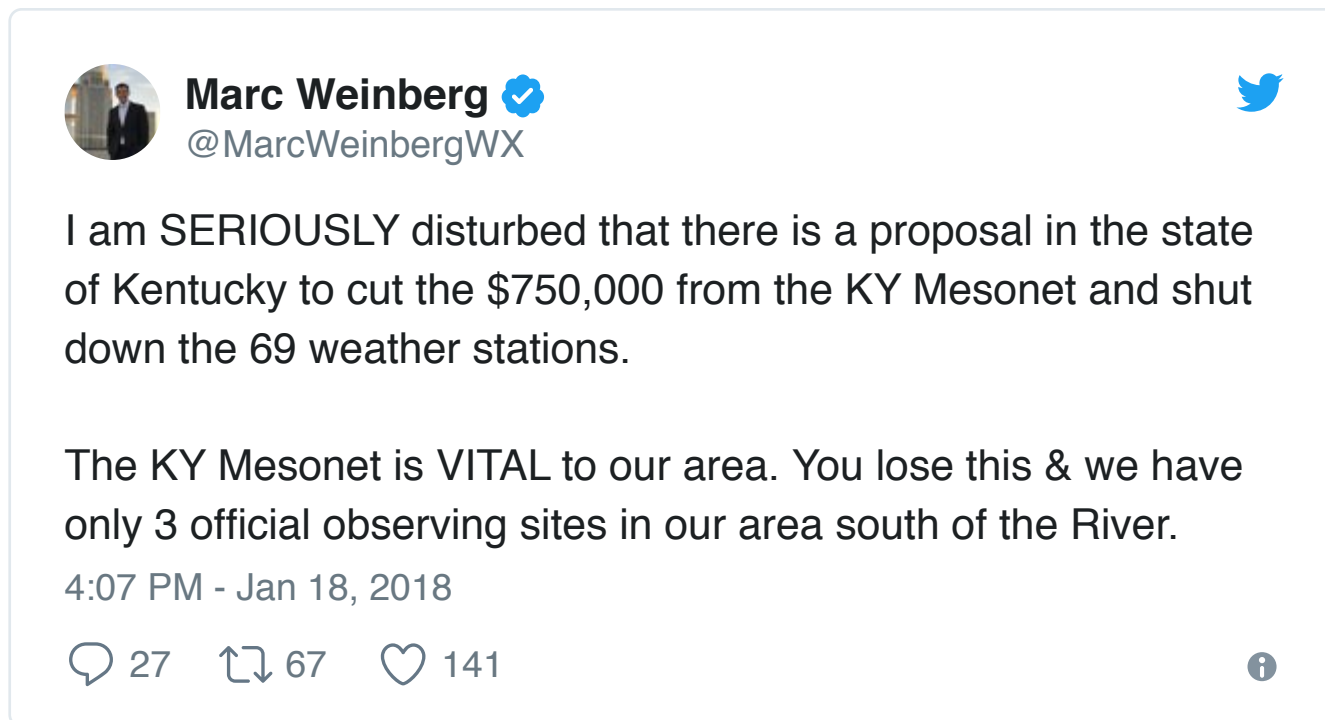
(Photo: jctabb, Getty Images/iStockphoto)

The Kentucky Mesonet, a network of 69 stations in 67 counties across the state, is vital to issuing severe weather warnings and making accurate forecasts. But it stands to lose thousands in state dollars should the Kentucky legislature approve Bevin's plan. It's one of [70 programs](/story/news/politics/2018/01/16/here-70-programs-not-funded-gov-matt-bevins-proposed-budget/1039109001/) that would see funding eliminated.

The director of the Mesonet, Stuart Foster, said he doesn't know how it would continue to operate without Kentucky's financial assistance.

Some say that without it providing real-time data on weather conditions — the only live information for most counties in Kentucky — the state could be less safe, particularly when warning residents about flash floods or tornadoes.

"We'll end up with significantly less data when making critical decisions," said WDRB chief meteorologist Marc Weinberg. "If you ask me to forecast without a Mesonet, I can. But I can tell you it's not going to be as good."



The Kentucky Mesonet, which dates back to 2006, was created after U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell secured about \$3 million in federal funding for it, said Foster, the Mesonet's director since it was created.

The information it collects — including wind speed and direction, precipitation, solar radiation, temperature and humidity — provides "ground truth information" that lets meteorologists have an accurate picture of the current meteorological situation.

"Mesonet data allows us to show where areas of enhancement or weakening (of storms) can be expected," said Joe Sullivan, the National Weather Service in Louisville's warning coordination meteorologist. "Warnings based on that data are more accurate and give people longer lead times to seek protection from those storms."

See also: [Some Kentucky schools could fail under Gov. Matt Bevin's proposed budget](/story/news/education/2018/01/18/gov-matt-bevin-proposed-budget-k-12-education/1043409001/)

More: [Under Bevin's budget, better days could be ahead for foster children](/story/news/politics/2018/01/19/kentucky-budget-social-services-matt-bevin/1029882001/)

When Sullivan moved to the area, there were eight to 10 observations you could get across the state, he said: "Everything else in between were complete blind spots."

Now, information goes directly to NWS offices that serve Kentucky. It's also publicly available online for farmers, students and emergency managers across the state. Weather observations are collected every five minutes.

In the last biennial state budget, the Mesonet received \$750,000 annually, which comprised much of its roughly \$1 million a year budget. That state money helped to also leverage dollars on both the federal and local level, Foster said.

While he understands the governor has a "difficult challenge ahead," Foster and others involved in the program hope to have the opportunity to make a case to officials on the benefits of the Mesonet for the entire state.

Its cornerstone mission, he said, is to enhance public safety.

"The motivation was to provide a source of high-quality weather observations that could be used to help ... in partnership with NWS, provide better weather forecasts and, in particular, better weather warnings in case of severe weather," Foster said.

Those observations are archived over time, creating a climatological record for Kentucky that can help researchers monitor drought conditions or weather extremes, Foster said.

A Bevin spokesman did not respond to an Associated Press inquiry about whether the program's elimination had been recommended because he is skeptical about the human causes of climate change.

The spokesman told the AP the proposal was designed to encourage debate about the effectiveness of the 70 programs facing a loss of funding.

"After a thorough review of state programs, the governor's budget proposal identified programs that should not be automatically perpetuated without a long-overdue analysis of their effectiveness during the legislative process," spokesman Woody Maglinger said.

In addition to helping forecast weather, the Mesonet's data can assist farmers looking to understand exactly what is affecting their crops.

Kevin McCubbin, who lives in Hodgenville in LaRue County, has been farming for more than 40 years, with the past 20 focused solely on corn and soybean farming. He said he uses the data to get a sense of past and present weather conditions.

"You can go out and ride and look at your crops and say, 'It looks like they're all blown over.' But the Mesonet will show you what happened, like gusts up to 45 miles per hour," McCubbin said.

More: [Does Bevin's budget 'stick it' to Louisville? City officials examining cuts' impacts \(/story/news/politics/metro-government/2018/01/18/gov-matt-bevins-budget-poor/1027913001/\)](/story/news/politics/metro-government/2018/01/18/gov-matt-bevins-budget-poor/1027913001/)

See also: [Kentucky's budget puzzle is missing a huge piece: pension reform \(/story/news/politics/2018/01/17/kentucky-budget-missing-pension-reform-matt-bevin/1028338001/\)](/story/news/politics/2018/01/17/kentucky-budget-missing-pension-reform-matt-bevin/1028338001/)

The data also becomes important when farmers seek federal assistance because it is a reliable record of conditions that affect the crops.

Emergency managers in counties across the state also plan responses with the help of Mesonet data. Paul Whitman worked in emergency management in Shelby County for 13 years, including the last five as the emergency manager, before retiring in 2017.

Monitoring data on the Mesonet website allowed him to see where storms actually were, rather than relying on forecasts. Responses, then, were based on accurate information and didn't waste taxpayer dollars unnecessarily, he said.

And, should an extreme weather event occur that resulted in a disaster declaration from the governor and president, providing an accurate, reliable record of weather required to receive aid is made easier with Mesonet data, Whitman said.

"It's quite an advancement in technology. I can't imagine we want to go backward," Whitman said.

There are no Mesonet weather stations in Jefferson County currently, in part because there were existing weather stations at Bowman Field and Louisville International Airport when the Mesonet started. Foster said he hoped to expand into the region in the future.

Weather stations near Louisville that would be lost without the Mesonet include locations in Elizabethtown, Brandenburg, Hardinsburg, Leitchfield, Hodgenville, Munfordville, Campbellsville, Lebanon, Shepherdsville, Shelbyville, La Grange and Carrollton, according to Weinberg.

"What's disturbing about this is that every piece of equipment is sitting there," Weinberg said. "... When you've invested so much and it's sitting there, being used by every single meteorologist, why take a step backwards and shut it down?"

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These Kentucky counties have Mesonet data collection devices:

Adair, Allen, Barren, Bath, Boone, Boyle, Breathitt, Breckinridge, Bullitt, Butler, Caldwell, Calloway, Campbell, Carroll, Casey, Christian, Clark, Clinton, Crittenden, Cumberland, Fayette, Franklin, Fulton, Graves, Grayson, Hardin, Harlan, Harrison, Hart, Henderson, Hopkins, Jackson, Johnson, Knott, Knox, LaRue, Lawrence, Letcher, Lewis, Lincoln, Logan, Madison, Marion, Marshall, Mason, McCreary, McLean, Meade, Mercer, Metcalfe, Monroe,

Morgan, Muhlenberg, Nicholas, Ohio, Oldham, Owen, Owsley, Pike, Rowan, Shelby, Simpson, Taylor, Todd, Trigg, Union, Warren

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