

History of NOAA in Boulder



NOAA – the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) – was formed by executive order in 1970 by President Richard Nixon. The order created an amalgamated agency, bundling together the National Weather Service, ocean and fisheries services, satellite operations, and environmental research. A major component of our nation’s environmental research had already been operating in Boulder since the early 1950s, and by 1966 was placed under the Environmental Science Services Administration.

The earliest ancestor of NOAA in Boulder was the Central Radio Propagation Laboratory (CRPL). The CRPL was created after World War II to continue research into over-the-horizon communications that had begun with military necessity. This research of the upper atmosphere, solar disturbances and wave propagation through the atmosphere all became part of the research and data sections of NOAA.

The CRPL landed in Boulder due to a few happy circumstances:

1. When it needed a new facility, the CRPL was looking for a “radio quiet zone” in which to conduct research; Boulder was able to meet that need (and, in fact, the Department of Commerce labs still maintain a radio quiet zone just north of town on Table Mountain);
2. The requirements for the lab included proximity to a research university and an airport, and both are located in or near Boulder;

3. Community leaders jumped into the competition to win the federal lab and raised nearly \$100,000 to buy land that was at the time being used for live-stock pasture; and,
4. President Truman, fearing the Soviets would attack Washington, D.C., when they developed an A-bomb, decreed that new government construction should be well outside the nation's capitol.

In the early 1950s, however, when scientists at the CRPL were asked to relocate to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, many balked at leaving cutting-edge science communities in the East, near to venerable institutions like MIT, Harvard and Princeton. One scientist later said Colorado and Boulder were considered a “scientific Siberia.”

Things change. Now, due to the Boulder area's heralded quality of life, including natural beauty and an attractive climate, scientists are hotly competing for jobs in atmospheric, environmental, and space sciences here – at NOAA, the University of Colorado and Colorado State University, and the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), among others. In fact, with employees at these institutions and with private companies spinning off from federal and state-sponsored research, the Rocky Mountain Front Range region, including Boulder, boasts one of the highest concentrations of scientists engaged in studying the atmosphere and solar-terrestrial physics in the entire world.