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WHITHER GOEST THE WEATHER?

A meteorologist is so often asked, "Why, with all your satellites, radars and computers can't you forecast the weather any better?" This very same question is being asked by meteorologists themselves in a number of ongoing research programs aimed at improving the weather information provided to various sectors of the American public. NASA has estimated that over 20 billion dollars worth of weather related economic losses are suffered annually - but that over \$5 billion of those could be easily avoidable by the application of currently available weather information and forecasts. The fact of the matter is, most forecasts today are actually quite good, much better than might be thought from a casual monitoring of radio and television weather reports. The reasons are not so much the inaccuracies of the science, but the difficulties of transmitting the information to the final user.

Consider the Chicago metropolitan area - the forecasts you hear are really a general outlook for an area approaching 10,000 sq. miles. The forecast may include the phrase "cooler near the lake" - but how much cooler and how near the lake is omitted. Frequently during the night, temperature differences of as much as 25° exists between the rural and lightly populated suburban areas and the lakeshore. Conversely, on a hot summer afternoon when a lake breeze is blowing, Grant Park could read 55° - while Joliet might be blistering at 96°. The forecast may call for a "30 percent chance of showers". This means that

30 percent of the large forecast area can expect some shower activity during the day. Nary a cloud all day at LaSalle County - but a 5 hour deluge in Northern Cook County.

A meteorologist however is often acutely aware of these local weather differences, and has the ability to forecast them. While our skill in providing long range forecasts for the upcoming season, month, or even next week is highly limited, advances in weather science over the past decade have made rapid improvements in our ability to forecast short term weather events particularly in the next 6 to 18 hours. And these are precisely the time frames in which many important economic decisions are made. Should we call in extra staff? Should we plan to irrigate tonight or count on the "50 percent chance of showers"? Had we better make an all out effort to apply fungicides? Should I rework my schedule to do much needed maintenance today, or bank on clear skies through mid-morning tomorrow? The skies look threatening now, and there's a chance of "thunderstorms" in the forecast - but do I have 2 more hours to complete this task?

The meteorologist can often answer these questions with a high degree of accuracy. The trouble is that you can't talk to that meteorologist. National Weather Service forecasters are in fact specifically prohibited from providing routine specialized forecasts to individuals, groups, corporations, etc. (unless by federal mandate for the aviation industry). Their policy is in fact to refer specialized forecast consulting to private meteorological consultants, who now play an important role in delivering meteorological products to user groups.