

Our **CHAT** with
Mitchell J.
ROSS,

Director of the Acquisition
and Grants Office of the
National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration

NCMA Executive Director Michael Fischetti recently interviewed Mitchell J. Ross to discuss the ins and outs of acquisition within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Edited by Ryan Burke

MICHAEL FISCHETTI:

Please introduce yourself to our readers. What is your current title and responsibilities? What previous titles and responsibilities have you held?

MITCHELL J. ROSS:

I am the director of the Acquisition and Grants Office of NOAA. I'm responsible for the acquisition and financial assistance activities of NOAA. Formed into its current state in 1970, NOAA traces its lineage to 1807 with the creation of the Coast and Geodetic Survey. The bureau is dedicated to understanding and predicting changes in the environment and to conserve and manage coastal and marine resources.

I began my federal service in 1978 when I was appointed to the first class of Presidential Management Interns and assigned to the Department of the Navy. My internship focused on acquisition management. I joined the Naval Air Systems Command as a career civil servant in 1980 and became a contracting officer.

I left federal service in 1985 to join BDM International Incorporated, a professional and technical services firm. I had multiple assignments and became the vice president of Corporate Contracts and Procurement, responsible for all contract activities of the operating company engaged in business with the U.S. federal government. My areas of responsibility included contracts, pricing, subcontracts, procurement, property, and export/import. I also managed the small business program, the insurance and risk management program, and served as the corporate representative to industry associations and government on federal acquisition matters.

I returned to government service in 2002 when I joined NOAA. After multiple assignments, I became the director of the Acquisition and Grants Office. NOAA is the largest bureau of the U.S. Department of Commerce and devotes half of its budget to acquisition and financial assistance. The contracts and grants awarded by NOAA address critical national priorities in the environment and science.

In addition, I am a member of the American Society for Public Administration, the Association of Proposal Management Professionals, and NCMA. I am also a member of the federal Senior Executive Service.

Can you briefly describe the mission of NOAA's Acquisition and Grants Office?

The Acquisition and Grants Office acquires products and services and awards financial assistance to meet the mission of NOAA. In fiscal year 2014, approximately \$3.2 billion of a total NOAA budget of \$5.5 billion was obligated for contracts and grants. That includes interagency transfers to partner federal agencies. The program is quite diverse and includes ships, aircraft, satellites, facilities, IT, and services.

in October 2014, NCMA Executive Director Michael Fischetti interviewed Mitchell J. Ross, the director of the Acquisition and Grants Office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a bureau of the U.S. Department of Commerce, to discuss how acquisition works within NOAA.



Budgets are running low within federal agencies, but there have been some terrific initiatives among many other agencies to “do more with less,” with some marked successes. What are your key initiatives to support customer efficiencies, mission changes, and acquisition policy in this austere economic environment?

Let me highlight two key initiatives. The first is getting closer to our clients. In austere budget times, when it comes to acquisition, we need to do more and plan better. That includes a much more robust requirements definition and validation capability and a stronger independent cost estimating capability. We are trying to understand

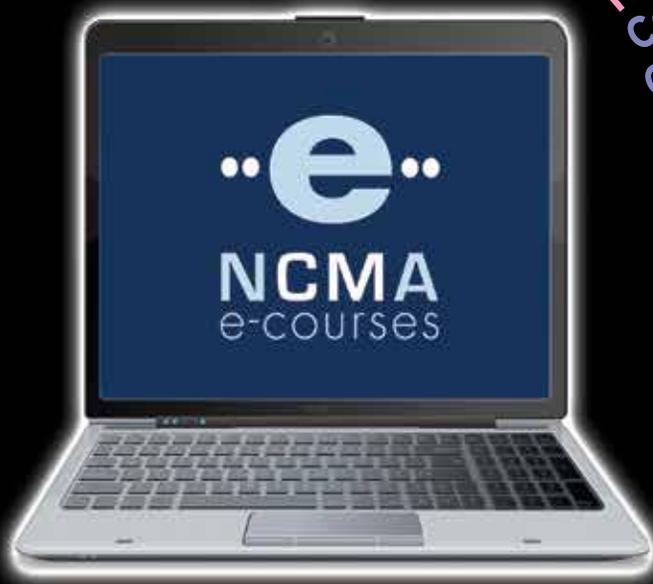
client needs much earlier. This is similar to the sourcing function that exists in industry, where in-depth understanding of the supply chain for a vertical market is part of the procurement function. We want to understand our client needs to that level so that we can become a core competency for that client.

A second key initiative is adapting to a multi-sector workforce. While we have only federal employees performing inherently governmental functions, we now have a third of our workforce coming from private firms. Our multi-sector workforce has enabled us to be more responsive to changing client needs and staff programs more rapidly and appropriately with needed expertise.

How does NOAA address strategic sourcing?

Strategic sourcing has been critical for NOAA. We began our program in earnest in 2010 with the launch of our “NOAALink” program for IT. The program includes multiple contracts for products and services, particularly NASA SEWP for products and a set of core services contracts awarded by NOAA. We have been able to see substantial

REBOOT on the BASICS



NEW! Subcontract Management Administration
Competitive and Collaborative Negotiations
Contract Modifications and Options
Performance-Based Acquisition
Introduction to the FAR
Contract Administration
Laws and Regulations
Intellectual Property
Contract Types

NCMA offers a full **spectrum** of e-courses so you can get the knowledge you need, right now! These courses are **convenient, affordable**, and worth 1 continuing professional education (CPE) hour. It's never been easier to power up your team.

Visit **www.ncmahq.org/ec14**
to find out more and to sign up for a FREE demo!

benefit from NOAALink. We have been able to do the spend analyses necessary to develop standards, which has enabled us to buy in volume for savings.

In the future, we hope to launch our second large strategic sourcing initiative, known as “Pro-Tech,” for professional and technical services. It will also be a mandatory use program and will be organized by domain.¹

Organizing our strategic sourcing by domain makes the most sense. The governmentwide contracts that offer generic services by function do not offer us the partnership we need with industry. We want to develop an industrial base of small, medium, and large firms that will

contract award, the less the parties communicate. The opposite is true in the private sector—the closer to contract award, the more the parties communicate.

How does NOAA handle the source selection process, including the use of “lowest-price technically acceptable” (LPTA) procurements?

I am not a fan of LPTA. It has its place in highly specified products and commodities, but it just does not fit well with services or developmental items. At NOAA, we cannot take a “race to the bottom” for our services. We need the best and the brightest we can find.

The bureau is dedicated to understanding and predicting changes in the environment and to conserve and manage coastal and marine resources.

partner with us to meet our mission in the domains we operate in over the next 10 to 20 years. That takes investment and commitment by all parties. We want to be well-respected among firms of all sizes.

How does NOAA balance quality and oversight objectives against streamlining and fast turnaround?

During the time that I have worked in federal procurement, I have seen a pendulum effect at work. The pendulum seems to swing between a desire for acquisition streamlining and a desire to reduce waste, fraud, and abuse. We have been in a “reduce waste, fraud, and abuse” period for a while and I think that will continue for some time. It has been hard on the workforce. We need to do more to remind our people—public and private—of the fine work that they do in service to the nation.

What are your views on the Office of Management and Budget’s “Myth-Busting”² campaign?

The Myth-Busting campaign was a great initiative. It needed to be done. My fear is that it has not been transformative, as some of us hoped it would be. We are still not communicating as often or as effectively as we need to.³ This is particularly true early in the acquisition life cycle, and that is where we really need it.

Our problems with poor requirements definition and poor cost estimating would be helped if we communicated more with industry. It is interesting to note that in the public sector, the closer to

How is contract administration conducted within NOAA?

I wish we had more focus on contract administration. Contract formulation comes first and last. Because of the complexity and vagaries of the federal budget, we are obligating most of our appropriation in the third and fourth quarters of the fiscal year. We have delegated much of the contract administration function to contracting officer representatives, including reviewing invoices and payment. This is a real challenge for us and for many agencies.

What previous education and/or experience have you been able to leverage and bring forward into your current position?

My education was aimed toward public service. I graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, with a BA in political science. I then obtained a master’s in public administration from the University of Southern California and an MA in government from Georgetown University. I completed the Federal Acquisition Management Course at the Defense Systems Management College and the National Security Studies Program at Georgetown University.

Right out of graduate school, I started with the federal government. I left public service after seven years and spent 17 years working in the private sector, returning to join NOAA 12 years ago. Virtually all of that time has been in procurement or in the larger realm of federal acquisition and contracting. That variety of experience has been very useful.

I have been around long enough to know that nobody is indispensable, and it is all about the team.

How do you measure the effectiveness and efficiency of contracting for your customers? Are there metrics or tools you use to assess and measure customer satisfaction?

We use survey instruments, focus groups, and a set of eight primary and 15 secondary metrics. Some of the primary measures include amount and rate of obligation, lead time, cost to obligate, data integrity, and client satisfaction level.

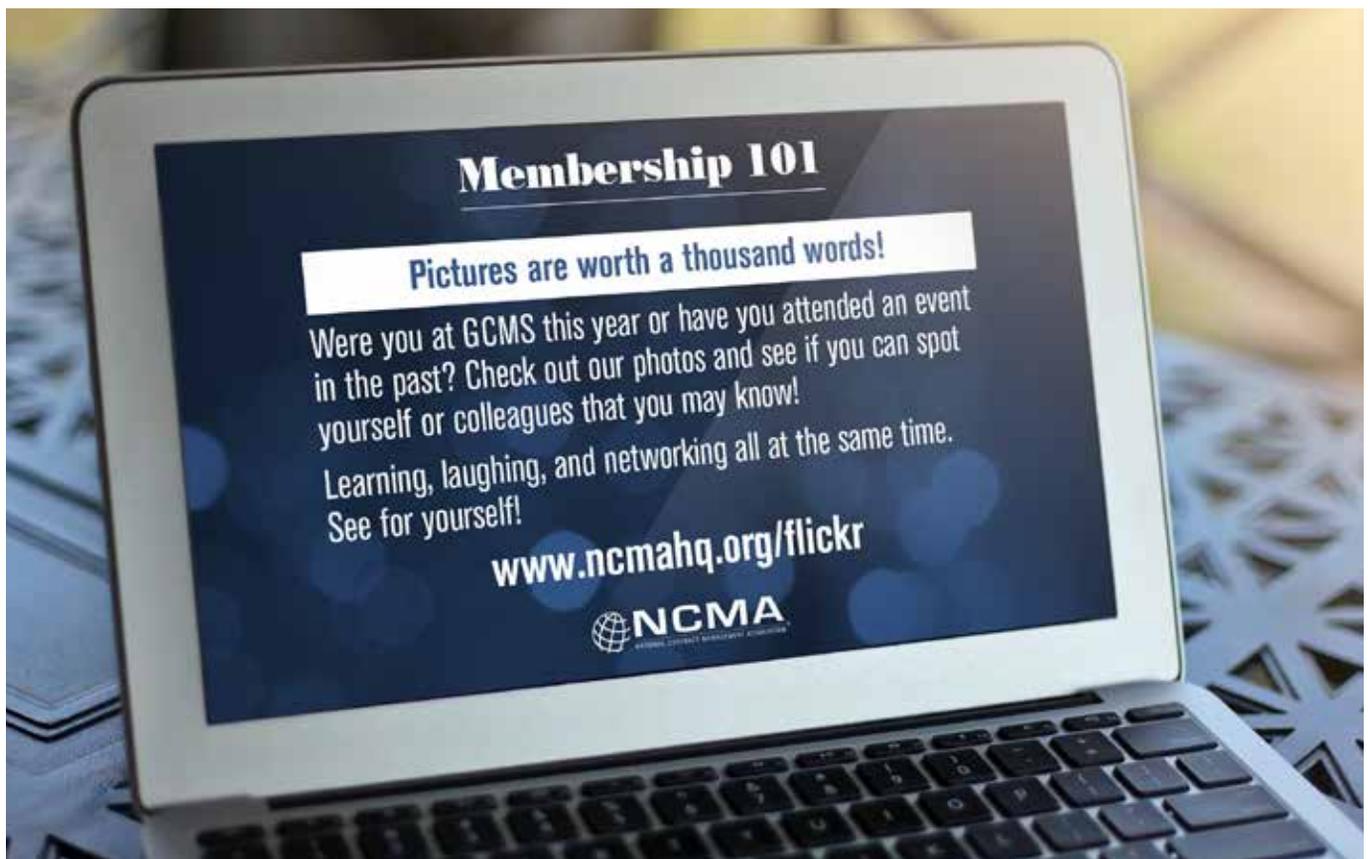
Today's contracting workforce is very challenged to meet their mission in this new era of austerity. What message would you like to convey to your government and industry colleagues and customers regarding how you are managing these challenges?

We need to help the career civil service recover some of the respect it deserves. Day in and day out, there is great work being done all across the public sector. The spotlight on problems is necessary and appropriate, yet the spotlight on success is seldom seen. The message is to step up and publicly identify that which is working well.

Contracting workforce training is often highlighted as an area of concern and solution to real or perceived problems in today's acquisition system. How do you react to the notion that training is a key issue?

Training is one issue. Education and experience are also issues, and just as important, if not more so, than training. We need better-prepared people and we need people to get the experience needed to develop savvy business acumen before they are promoted so rapidly that they can't cope with the responsibilities they have been given.

Relevant experience is part of why we moved much of our workforce out of the Washington, DC, metropolitan area to other parts of the United States. The stability and time to grow and develop is much greater outside the capital area. There is no IQ level or set of academic degrees that can substitute for experience.



Do you believe training would be more effective if both training and certification were applied against a universal standard across the profession, irrespective of individual government or industry employment (i.e., NCMA's *Contract Management Body of Knowledge* or *Certified Professional Contracts Manager* certification versus DAWIA/FAC Levels 1, 2, or 3)?

Yes. This is a real impediment to hiring at the middle manager levels. Without the FAC-C certifications provided by the government, it is virtually impossible to bring in private sector talent. The time to catch up is too great. A universal certification such as that offered by NCMA would solve that problem and open up a talent pool that we have not been able to access.

What are your goals in the near future for NOAA and what would you like for your legacy to be after you're gone?

I have been around long enough to know that nobody is indispensable, and it is all about the team. The people that will follow me will make NOAA a better place. We all want to leave our organizations in a better place than when we arrived.

Our guiding principles have been to improve communication, cooperation, and the workforce. We apply these principles to all of our initiatives and programs.

Our managers are responsible for providing a place to work characterized by dignity and respect, the tools and methods to perform exceptionally well, and the opportunity to do meaningful work. If the organization embeds those goals and responsibilities, we will move from a fine service delivery organization to a core competency. If acquisition as a core competency leads us to a robust industrial base to help NOAA establish an environmental intelligence capability, the nation will have been well served. That will be a legacy to admire.

You have had a successful career in contracting. What reflections do you have as you look back from where you are today? What advice and guidance would you like to share for those just entering the field or who are relatively new to it?

It's a great field. It has so much variety that it never ceases to be interesting. It has a scholarly component, a practical component, both public and private opportunities, and it has a lot of interesting people. I encourage people to take advantage of the programs offered by the associations. NCMA offers chapters all across the country and has a large variety of programs.

In addition to supporting participation in our association and our chapters, do you support your employees becoming involved and taking advantage of the rest of the professional development opportunities offered through NCMA (e.g., speaking at or attending training forums, writing articles for the *Journal of Contract Management* or *Contract Management Magazine*, obtaining advanced certifications, etc.)? How can NCMA, as the professional organization for contract management, better help you meet your responsibilities and challenges?

Yes we do. We are pleased to provide NCMA membership to all of our acquisition professionals and strongly encourage their participation. I think NCMA provides a unique resource to government acquisition personnel because it brings together the public and private sectors. I think one of the most important things NCMA can do to help us meet our responsibilities and challenges is to continue to look for opportunities to further the dialogue between the public and private sectors. **CM**

ABOUT MITCHELL J. ROSS

MITCHELL J. ROSS is the director of the Acquisition and Grants Office of NOAA. He began his federal service in 1978 with the Department of the Navy, and later joined the Naval Air Systems Command as a career civil servant in 1980 and became a contracting officer. After leaving federal service and working in industry for 17 years, he returned to government service in 2002 when he joined NOAA.

He holds a BA in political science from the University of California, Los Angeles; a masters in public administration from the University of Southern California; and an MA in government from Georgetown University. He also completed the Federal Acquisition Management Course at the Defense Systems Management College and the National Security Studies Program at Georgetown University.

He is a member of the American Society for Public Administration, the Association of Proposal Management Professionals, and NCMA. He is also a member of the federal Senior Executive Service.

Send comments about this interview to cm@ncmahq.org.

ENDNOTES

1. Editor's note: NOAA organizes its strategic sourcing by "domain," meaning the core areas in which NOAA works—i.e., weather, oceans, fisheries, satellites, and enterprise solutions.
2. Editor's note: See www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/procurement/memo/Myth-Busting.pdf.
3. Editor's note: That is, government is not communicating with industry as often or as effectively as it needs to, and vice versa.