



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chair Lizzie Fletcher (D-TX)
of the Subcommittee on Environment

Joint Subcommittee Hearing:
EPA Advisory Committees: How Science Should Inform Decisions
Tuesday, July 16, 2019

Good afternoon. I would like to join Chairwoman Sherrill in welcoming all of our witnesses to today's hearing on advisory committees at the EPA.

The EPA is at its core a public health agency. It works to protect all Americans, especially the most vulnerable populations, from polluted air, water, and soil. The EPA promulgates environmental standards and protections that are informed by the most cutting-edge science. Much of this science is conducted at the agency by dedicated career scientists and engineers, and through extramural research grants funded by the EPA. However, a critical component to ensuring the best science is utilized by the agency is through expert advisory committees and boards that provide external advice and recommendations on a variety of topics.

Advisory committees have long played a vital role in the federal government to supplement the knowledge of federal agencies by providing additional expertise. The advisory committee process is an opportunity for public engagement in federal decision-making, as meetings are generally accessible to the public. Congress, understanding the need for independent scientific advice to inform the EPA Administrator's regulatory decision making, established the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, or CASAC, and the EPA Science Advisory Board, or SAB. These committees allow EPA to broaden its access to additional scientific expertise not contained within the agency itself.

Scientific advisory committees at the EPA provide advice and recommendations that are used to inform research, regulations, standards, compliance, and enforcement functions of the agency. The CASAC plays a critical role in reviewing the National Ambient Air Quality Standards, or NAAQS by calling upon specialized expertise to ensure that the most robust and relevant science is used to protect the air we breath. The Science Advisory Board, by far the largest advisory committee at the EPA, provides feedback on science throughout the agency's decision-making process, while the Board of Scientific Counselors, or BOSC, informs the EPA's science and research priorities.

Appointment to these, and other, advisory boards at the EPA has historically been considered a great honor; a recognition of the member's preeminence and expertise in the field. We are very fortunate to have three such experts who have served as members and Chairs of the CASAC, SAB, and the BOSC, as part of our distinguished witness panel today.

Given the clear role advisory committees play in helping EPA meet its mission, the findings of the GAO's report released yesterday raise serious concerns. The deficiencies in the appointment process found for the SAB and CASAC are very troubling as these committees are responsible for reviewing the science that underpins many agency decisions that directly impact public health. According to the Federal Advisory Committee Act, members of these boards should be clear of conflicts of interest and meet the highest ethical standards before joining advisory committees. EPA's inconsistent compliance with its own ethics policy related to advisory committee members raises doubts about the agency's actions. The American people should feel confident that all our agencies, including and especially the EPA are operating in their best interest, protecting them – not sidelining transparency as a means to an end.

The President's recent Executive Order purportedly "improve" federal advisory committees does not seem to have a basis for requiring the termination of one-third of agency advisory committees and instituting a limit of committees across the federal government. I want to commend Chairwoman Johnson for asking the agencies within this Committee's jurisdiction how they plan on implementing this Order so that we can try to ensure that valuable scientific expertise is not indiscriminately cut because of arbitrary limits.

The EPA is responsible for protecting public and environmental health through the application of strong science to environmental and regulatory decisions throughout the agency. Baseless attempts to modify, change, and in some cases undermine, the agency's established processes to accomplish this goal should be of concern to us all.

I look forward to discussing the troubling findings of this GAO report, as well as hearing from our other distinguished witnesses who have served on multiple advisory committees at the EPA, how these findings will impact the future of science at the agency.

And with that I yield back the balance of my time.