



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

Opening Statement

Chairman Bill Foster (D-IL)
of the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
Brain Drain: Rebuilding the Federal Scientific Workforce

Wednesday, March 17, 2021

Good morning, and thank you to all of our Members and panelists for joining us today for this Subcommittee hearing on brain drain from the federal scientific workforce. This is our first Subcommittee hearing of the 117th Congress, and I'm very pleased to return as the Chairman of the Investigations & Oversight Subcommittee to continue our important work. I'm also pleased to welcome Ranking Member Obernolte to the Subcommittee. I look forward to working together in support of America's scientific community to ensure that this country remains the global leader in science and innovation.

Today's hearing focuses on a subject close to my heart: the federal scientific workforce. The scientists of the Federal Government are a pillar in some of America's greatest achievements. Government scientists oversee grants for priority research areas, fund basic research that expands our horizons through breakthrough discoveries, and lead the way in helping to address the most pressing challenges of our time, from climate change and clean energy, to public health, to national security. Whether pushing the boundaries of scientific knowledge or informing policymaking with the best available science, government scientists perform a vital public service.

Unfortunately, recent years have been difficult for career government scientists. The last administration's hostility towards evidence-based decision-making created an awful tension with scientists attempting to carry out their duties. As violations of scientific integrity worsened and political interference escalated, scientists felt marginalized and demoralized. Far too often, their expertise was ignored, their motives were impugned, and their work was dismissed. And this crisis arrived after years of budget constraints had already slashed their funding.

Sadly, the consequences of the failure to properly support the federal scientific workforce are clear: in critical science-based agencies and occupations, far too many scientists have recently decided to leave the Federal Government. The statistics are alarming. According to data reviewed by the Committee staff, EPA's workforce declined by 3.9% during the last administration and over 16% since 2009. DOE's civil service STEM workforce has not increased

in 4 years. EPA, DOE and NOAA have all lost large numbers of STEM workers in key occupations, such as environmental protection specialists, nuclear engineers and oceanographers. Even offices with broad bipartisan support have not been spared: DOE's Office of Nuclear Energy lost over 20% of its workforce in just the first three years of the previous administration. And in many science agencies, outsized gender, racial and ethnic employment disparities persist in STEM workforces. These facts show just how much federal scientific capacity is at risk of being lost due to scientific workforce reductions.

The departure of so much scientific talent and institutional knowledge from the government represents a competitive disadvantage for the United States. We must fix this. We can rebuild the federal scientific workforce, but to do so, we must recommit ourselves to strengthening scientific integrity in the Federal Government and supporting career scientists. Today's discussion will help us to understand how we got here, the implications of a reduced scientific workforce, and how best to reverse these trends and restore federal scientific capacity. I am eager to hear from our expert witnesses, who are strong advocates for career scientists and the role of science in government. I look forward to hearing your ideas about how we can address this issue.

I now yield to Ranking Member Obernolte for his opening remarks.