



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

Opening Statement

**Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)**

Joint Subcommittee Hearing:

*EPA's IRIS Program: Reviewing its Progress and Roadblocks Ahead*

March 27, 2019

Thank you Madam Chair, and I would like to join you in welcoming our witnesses this morning. This Committee has a long history of oversight of the EPA's IRIS program. I have been able to witness the progress made over the years, including the great strides the IRIS program has made in addressing recommendations made by the National Academies. These improvements have been applauded by the National Academies, EPA's Science Advisory Board, and members of this Committee.

It is because of this progress that I am particularly concerned about the GAO report released earlier this month. It appears that political leadership at the EPA is suppressing IRIS's ability to complete its invaluable chemical assessments and to communicate with stakeholders who are reliant on IRIS's toxicity values. I am concerned that this will lead to a backsliding in IRIS's progress. For example, in this year's High Risk List, GAO stated that leadership commitment to the program decreased from meeting GAO's standard in the last report, to only partially meeting the standard this year.

Insufficient commitment to the IRIS program is insufficient commitment to ensuring the health and safety of Americans. As my colleague Ms. Sherrill pointed out, IRIS is the gold standard for toxicity assessments, providing crucial information on which federal, state, and local governments can base their regulations and guidelines to keep air and water free of harmful contamination. IRIS assessments also empower communities by informing them of their exposure risks. In Willowbrook, Illinois, for example, residents began to develop mysterious symptoms related to their exposure to ethylene oxide emitted by a nearby factory. As IRIS had issued an assessment of ethylene oxide in 2016, residents were able to educate themselves on their risk, and with IRIS values to support their case, Willowbrook residents were able to push the Illinois state government to ban the use of ethylene oxide at the factory.

It is imperative that IRIS not be impeded in conducting chemical assessments and disseminating its conclusions to the public. Communities all across the United States – particularly communities that are poorer, more urban, and less white – are needlessly suffering due to contaminants in the air they breathe and the water they drink.

In my years on the Committee, an ongoing issue of controversy has been IRIS's assessment of formaldehyde. By many accounts, the assessment is ready to be reviewed, but is being held up and ultimately was dropped from IRIS's list of priority chemicals – a decision that appears to be politically, rather than scientifically, motivated. Currently, there are two outstanding letters – one to Administrator Wheeler and one to Dr. Francesca Grifo – that I and three of my Senate colleagues sent to the EPA inquiring about the decision to suppress this report and whether this delay violates the agency's scientific integrity policy. We look forward to reviewing the documents requested in this letter, which we expect the Agency to submit to us by April 5.

Thank you, and I yield back to Chairwoman Sherrill.