

OPENING STATEMENT
Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR)
of the Subcommittee on Environment

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Environment
Subcommittee on Oversight
“Examining the Scientific and Operational Integrity of EPA’s IRIS Program”

September 6, 2017

Mr. Chairman, this Committee has a long tradition of examining the Environmental Protection Agency’s Integrated Risk Information System, or IRIS. The last time this Committee held a hearing on it was back in 2014. At that hearing, I said that this Committee needs to allow the EPA to fulfill its mission of protecting the public’s health from environmental hazards. Producing assessments of chemicals that may cause harm to our constituents and our communities is critical to that mission.

I am disappointed that, today, this Committee is once again headed in the wrong direction. Rather than undermining important public health assessments, we should be supporting and in fact strengthening the EPA’s efforts to protect Americans from unsafe chemical exposure. Given that the Committee has not held a hearing on this issue in three years, it is troubling that today the Majority called two witnesses with clear interests in a particular outcome, but did not call the EPA or the GAO. This does not seem to me like a hearing to investigate how to best protect our constituent’s health, which is what we should be doing, but instead an attempt to look for a basis for weakening or eliminating the IRIS program. That is unacceptable.

It is also perplexing that the Majority is hosting a hearing to emphasize industry-held criticisms of the IRIS program at a time when the independent organizations that have investigated the IRIS program are citing its notable improvements. Just last week, the independent EPA Science Advisory Board - “the SAB” - wrote a letter to Administrator Pruitt praising the progress of the IRIS program. That letter said, quote – “The SAB has observed significant enhancements in the IRIS program over the past few years, with impactful changes over the past year, and marked progress over the past six months. The changes are so extensive and positive that they constitute a virtual reinvention of IRIS.” I will repeat that last line: “The changes are so extensive and positive that they constitute a virtual reinvention of IRIS.”

The work of IRIS is especially critical to protecting the health of our nation’s children. The human health assessments developed through the program provide vital information that aids the EPA in its decision making, and also informs state and local governments and public health professionals. Fundamentally the IRIS program helps those tasked with protecting the public’s health to make the best decisions they can by using the best available science to determine the potential harmful effects of chemical exposures.

That is precisely why this Committee has taken an interest in the activities of IRIS in the past, particularly when the program was not living up to its potential. In response to a request from

Congress, the National Academies reviewed the IRIS program and released a report, two months prior to our 2014 hearing, which made recommendations for improvements that EPA should implement. What is the status of those recommendations, what progress has the program made, and what improvements are still needed? Those are the questions we should be asking EPA and the National Academies. Unfortunately, the Majority did not invite anyone from EPA or the National Academies to offer any answers.

Mr. Chairman, the IRIS program is too important for there not to be a thoughtful examination of its status and a fuller review of the recent progress it has made. This Committee has the important role of providing oversight of the Administration's efforts in its jurisdiction. During the Obama Administration this Committee held dozens and dozens of hearings investigating actions of the Administration, and the EPA was here to answer. Yet, now that there is a Republican Administration, this Committee has failed to have a single hearing with any of the presidential appointees in its jurisdiction. During the Obama Administration, Administrator Pruitt testified in front of this Committee in his role as Oklahoma's Attorney General and was highly critical of the EPA. Now that he is the EPA Administrator, the American people deserve the opportunity to hear his priorities for the EPA. This Committee must fulfill its duty of providing oversight of the agencies in its jurisdiction.

Mr. Chairman, will you commit to holding a Full Committee hearing on a legislative day this year with EPA Administrator Pruitt?

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I ask that the letter from EPA's SAB, which I referenced earlier, be made part of the record.

Thank you. I yield back.