

Opening Statement - Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-IL)
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Research & Science Education Hearing
*“Social, Behavioral and Economic Research: Oversight of the Need for Federal Investments and
Priorities for Funding”*
June 2, 2011

Thank you Chairman Brooks. As a former political science professor this is a topic of particular interest to me. In the 110th Congress, when Congressman Baird chaired this subcommittee, he held a series of three hearings examining the role of the social, behavioral, and economic – or SBE – sciences in helping to develop solutions to some of society’s most pressing challenges. The themes he selected were energy, national security, and health. During these three hearings, we heard testimony from 13 witnesses, all of whom agreed with little or no reservation that the SBE sciences provide significant benefits to society and return on taxpayer investments.

A few years before that, when Republicans held the majority and my friend Bob Inglis chaired this subcommittee, he held a hearing on “The Role of Social Science Research in Disaster Preparedness and Response.” I want to elaborate a

bit on that topic in particular because I believe that with the severe floods, tornadoes, wildfires, hurricanes, and oil spills that have hit many of our own communities in the last few years, and the loss of life and property we have witnessed from some of these events just in the last few weeks, this will resonate with all of us. The Geography and Spatial Sciences Program within the SBE Directorate has been instrumental in advancing the use of geographic information systems – or GIS. These tools have helped us visualize and understand the vulnerabilities of communities to natural disasters, and they have helped policy makers make better decisions on where to site critical infrastructure.

Science funded by the SBE Directorate also helps us understand how to plan for and respond to emergencies. I would particularly like to mention the Decision, Risk, and Management Science program, which aims to increase the understanding and effectiveness of decision making by individuals, groups, organizations, and society. Now I'm probably a little biased because I received a master's degree in a related field, but I think this is an absolutely critical

area of research. We saw the need in the BP oil spill, with organizational and decision-making problems compounding technological ones. We also are seeing evidence of human and regulatory failure at the Fukushima reactor in Japan.

SBE research can help us better quantify and evaluate risks, build resilient organizations, and help emergency management planners develop the most effective strategies for keeping members of their communities safe. And then, once the immediate danger has passed, science funded by the SBE Directorate helps us understand the short-term and long-term implications of how individuals and communities respond to these events.

Now there are some who would presume to be able to determine whether a research proposal is important enough to society to merit support based simply on the title of a grant. I think a story from a few years back would be instructive and stand as a warning to those trying to judge a grant by its title, be it in SBE or any other field. Forty years ago, Senator William Proxmire created the “Golden Fleece

Awards,” long before Taxpayers for Common Sense appropriated the term. Senator Proxmire famously gave one of these awards to E.F. Knipling for his research on “The Sexual Behavior of the Screw-worm Fly.” Now the Senator didn’t know it at the time, but the screwworm is a parasite that kills livestock, and occasionally humans, and this particular line of research helped save the lives of millions of livestock and as a result saved the cattle industry \$20 billion. That was a \$20 billion return on a \$250,000 grant, by the way. On top of that, consumers enjoyed a 5 percent decrease in the cost of beef at the supermarket. Dr. Knipling, ended up winning the 1992 World Food Prize for his work on parasites, and the Senator ended up apologizing.

Now I tell this story not because I want to pick on Senator Proxmire or I think the NSF is perfect. Reasonable people might disagree about priorities within the SBE Directorate, and it is our job to be vigilant and to make sure that taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely. And in spite of my academic experience, I myself question the value of some of the social science research out there. But I am going to

paraphrase our former colleague, Dr. Baird, in saying that in today's hearing, as in the previous four hearings I mentioned, I hope we are all prepared to have a rational discussion about the value of the social, behavioral, and economic sciences overall to our society and to the taxpayer.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here this morning and I look forward to your testimonies.