

**Opening Statement of
Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)**
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

“Threats from Space: A Review of U.S. Government Efforts to Track and Mitigate Asteroids and
Meteors, Part 1”

March 19, 2013

Good morning. I would like to welcome each of our witnesses to today’s hearing. And I would like to thank you for your patience when we were forced to reschedule this hearing in the wake of the Washington snow event two weeks ago.

As the Chairman has indicated, this hearing was called in response to recent events in which a large meteor unexpectedly exploded in the sky over Russia, damaging property and injuring people at almost the same time that a small asteroid passed less than 18,000 miles from Earth’s surface. While scientists indicate that those two events apparently were unrelated, they both serve as evidence that we live in an active solar system, with potentially hazardous objects passing through our neighborhood with surprising frequency.

Indeed, there is increasing scientific evidence that impacts by large asteroids and comets have had profound consequences for life on Earth at various times in the past, even contributing to mass extinctions. While such events are very rare, they obviously can cause untold damage, and are not something we want to have happen if we can avoid it.

I think it is our increased scientific understanding of Near Earth Objects and their potential to impact the Earth that has led Congress to take this subject seriously in recent years. In that regard, this Committee has taken a leadership role on these issues dating back to the efforts of former Chairman George Brown, Jr. in the early 1990s—a time when references to “killer asteroids” could still lead to giggles and eye-rolling. Since then, Members on both sides of the aisle, including Rep. Rohrabacher, former Chairman Hall, and former Rep. Giffords have all taken an active and productive interest in this topic, and progress has been made.

I hope that today’s hearing will provide us with a good update on the federal government’s efforts to detect, monitor, and potentially mitigate such hazardous Near Earth Objects. Much has been accomplished over the last decade, and I look forward to hearing about those efforts.

In addition, I would like to know if there are additional steps that we should be taking as a country, whether an expanded detection program or international collaborations or other such measures.

Well, we have much to discuss today and a distinguished panel of witnesses to help us in our oversight. I look forward to hearing from each of you.