

OPENING STATEMENT

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson [D-TX]

*Threats from Space: A Review of Private and International Efforts
to Track and Mitigate Asteroids and Meteors*

April 10, 2013

Good afternoon. I want to join the Chairman in welcoming our witnesses to today's hearing. You each have deep experience and expertise directly related to the hearing topic, and I look forward to your testimony.

As the Chairman has indicated, this hearing is the second that the Committee has held in the opening months of the 113th Congress on the topic of asteroids. Last month's meteor over Russia and the close passage of a Near Earth asteroid have both stimulated public interest in the potential threat posed by asteroids and comets, and this second hearing is certainly a reflection of that interest.

I will not attempt to repeat the sentiments I expressed at our first hearing on this topic and instead will confine myself to a few brief comments. First, it is clear from last month's hearing that there is still a lot of work to be done to track and characterize asteroids that could potentially impact the Earth. And that even relatively small asteroids could do significant damage if they hit a heavily populated area. So I hope that our witnesses today will help us better understand what will be needed to complete the existing survey as well as perhaps extend it to smaller sized asteroids.

Second, I want to better understand both the strengths and limits of NASA relying on private organizations such as B 612 for detection of potential Earth impacting asteroids. My problem is not with the efforts of such organizations to address what they see as an important problem. Instead, my concern is that we have reached a point where our government has to hope that non-governmental organizations will somehow do what the government should be doing but is apparently unwilling to pay for. However, if the protection of the planet is not an appropriate role for the federal government, I'm not sure what is.

Finally, before I close, I will note that the President's just-released budget request proposes to invest in a number of asteroid-related initiatives. We will need to closely examine the President's proposals in the coming weeks to fully understand what is being proposed, so I'm not going to comment on them in any depth today. Instead, I will simply say that I deeply hope that whatever new initiatives are being proposed will be accompanied by adequate funding of their own rather than be funded by cannibalizing other important NASA programs. Robbing Peter to pay Paul will not give us sustainable and effective NASA programs, and I hope we will all resist the temptation to do so as we try to address the challenge posed by Near Earth asteroids.