

OPENING STATEMENT

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Subcommittee on Research & Technology
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

*NEON Warning Signs: Examining the Management of the National Ecological Observatory
Network*
Joint Subcommittee Hearing

September 19, 2015

Thank you Chairwoman Comstock and Chairman Loudermilk for holding this hearing, and thank you Dr. Olds and Dr. Collins for being here this morning.

About 6 weeks ago, NSF informed the Committee that NEON was on a projected path, if not corrected, to go \$80 million over budget. Clearly a significant problem. While I hope that all of my colleagues join me in supporting the scientific goals of the NEON project and are interested in seeing it put on a better path going forward, I know we share the goal of being good stewards of taxpayer money. And I also believe we agree that, in a situation like this, more information sharing with the Committee at an earlier date would have helped us do better by these goals.

On the other hand, it seems a crisis may have been averted by swift action on the part of NSF and the NEON governing board, and this hearing is an opportunity to learn some lessons for the future. Today we will examine what went wrong, including whether NSF could have taken more aggressive steps sooner, and whether NSF has since taken all necessary corrective actions.

As we all know, this is not the first time this Committee is holding hearings about the NEON project. Our most recent hearings addressed NEON Inc.'s use of management fees under their cooperative agreement. In those hearings we also addressed larger risk management policies, including policies for cost estimates and contingency funds. In fact, those broader topics have come up at a number of hearings over the last few years. As we take a close look at what went wrong with NEON, we should also be considering what broader reforms may still be necessary. The NSF Inspector General, Ms. Lerner, is not on today's panel, but she has weighed in for several years on her broader facility management and policy concerns, and earlier this week on NEON specifically with an "Alert Memo" on NEON's potential \$80 million cost overrun. As we discuss what reforms NSF has implemented and what reforms may still be necessary, it will be valuable for us to have that discussion in the context of the Inspector General's recommendations.

Finally, I want to address what happens now to ensure that NEON remains a valuable scientific asset for the research community and for the nation. We do not have a representative from the ecological sciences research community on today's panel. However, a group of leaders from that research community did publish a statement supporting the NEON project, while also expressing concerns about the level of engagement between NSF and the user community in determining the scientific priorities for NEON. I am attaching that statement to my opening remarks.

I don't believe anyone is interested in delaying NEON construction by another year. However, we are in effect at a temporary pause in the project. Given how much the scientific opportunities, the technological options, and the environment itself have changed since the NEON scope and design were approved 5 years ago, it might be worth taking advantage of this unplanned pause to ensure that we truly are getting the best science out of this facility.

I look forward to today's discussion. I believe the Committee can work productively with NSF to ensure NEON's success going forward and avert similar challenges for future NSF projects.

I yield back.