

Opening Statement - Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-IL)
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Research & Science Education
House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Hearing on:
NSF Major Research Equipment and Facilities Management
March 8, 2012

Thank you Chairman Brooks. Ten years is probably too long a period between hearings on the important topic of how NSF manages and oversees its large facilities over their full lifecycle, especially given the many changes in the MREFC process in that time. So I am pleased we are having this hearing this morning and grateful to the witnesses who are taking the time to help us understand where we stand with MREFC and what oversight issues remain.

When I was subcommittee chair in the last Congress, we held a hearing on the role of NSF in supporting university research infrastructure. That was a somewhat different topic, but still part of the larger question of how we balance support for research infrastructure with support for research grants. Remaining a global leader in scientific R&D requires more than intellectual freedom and grant funding. Cutting edge research requires state-of-the-art

research facilities, and we can no longer take it for granted that the best scientists want to live and work in the United States.

In a 2003 report on science and engineering infrastructure, the National Science Board recommended that the share of the NSF budget dedicated to research infrastructure should fall in the range of 22-27 percent, but closer to the high-end of that range. While I am pleased that the FY 2013 budget request restores funding to MREFC projects after several years of cuts, as a percentage of the budget, funding for facilities remains at the bottom end of that range. This can at least in part be explained by the blip in ARRA funding in 2009 that reduced pressure on outyear budgets for MREFC, and the fact that there is no new-start proposed for FY 2013. However, this remains an area of concern for me and one I will continue to follow closely in my leadership role on this subcommittee.

Returning to the specific topic of this hearing, major research facilities management, there are a couple of issues I'm hoping to learn more about.

First, I'd like to understand how MREFC policies have evolved in the last few years, including the role of the National Science Board, and what instigated these changes. In particular, I would like to know what we learned from the Deep Underground Science and Engineering Laboratory, or DUSEL. While I believe that the December 2010 decision by the Board with respect to DUSEL was probably the right one for the Foundation, letting the project advance as far as it did before terminating it was harmful and wasteful. So I'd like to know what policies have been put in place since then to avoid a repeat of this situation.

Second, I'd like to address the ongoing dispute between the Inspector General and NSF management with respect to contingency funds. I'll begin by saying that I'm comfortable with the definition NSF is using for contingency funds, as it appears to be consistent with the private sector standard for

project management and with practices at other agencies. As someone trained in systems engineering, I also think that calculating a contingency total based on the ensemble mean of all foreseeable risks across all aspects of a project and incorporating that into the total project cost is the right approach.

But the IG has raised important questions regarding whether there are sufficient controls over drawdowns from the contingency fund and whether the fund should be held at the agency or with the project. I think there are good arguments on both sides of this issue, and I worry also that the projects currently underway are caught in this dispute between the IG and NSF management. I would like to hear how the IG and the NSF are working to resolve their differences.

Finally, as stewards of the taxpayer money, it is incumbent upon us to ask whether it is appropriate that any funds left over due to outstanding management or just plain luck should be returned to NSF, where re-scoping of that

particular project can be balanced against other agency priorities.

I know that NSF and Mr. Yeck are proud of how the IceCube project came in under budget, and rightly so. Mr. Yeck –from everything I know you did an exemplary job with that project under extraordinary conditions. I’d like to learn more about what IceCube was able to accomplish with those “leftover” funds, but also ask the broader question of whether this is the most appropriate use of NSF dollars given that the most important science was already prioritized in the original scope and design of IceCube.

While I don’t have answers to these questions -- and I hope our witnesses will share their insights -- I do think it’s critical that we align incentives with prudent project management and outcomes that are the most appropriate in terms of both the science and the budget.

Overall, I am very pleased with how far the agency has come in the last few years in strengthening management and

oversight of its large facilities, but I look forward to using this hearing to explore where issues may remain.