Testimony of Manuel (Manny) Ehrlich
Board Member, U.S. Chemical Safety Board
Subcommittee on Government Operations
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
April 16, 2015

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Subcommittee:

This hearing is titled "The Worst Places to Work in the Federal Government." I imagine that we are invited here because you think the U.S. Chemical Safety Board is one of those places. With respect, I believe it is a great place to work, and I feel privileged to have been appointed by the president to the CSB board last December.

The Employee Satisfaction Survey does show CSB staff morale is low in some areas, and we are working on that. I have to emphasize that over the past few months I have been continually impressed by the dedication and professionalism of the CSB's staff. I am confident that if the Board continues to work with these dedicated public servants staff morale will improve.

Since I became a Board Member, I have been personally involved with virtually every staff employee on a face to face basis, talked to them about their concerns, asked them about their important work, and asked them what we, as presidentially appointed board members, can do to show appreciation for their work.

I have been to industrial chemical accident sites with investigation teams and have seen how diligently they perform this potentially hazardous work, the long hours and months away from home, and the commitment to making industrial chemical facilities safer places for workers, companies and communities.

The job satisfaction survey does not tell the whole story. In fact, I have found commitment to the CSB mission and workplace to be very strong, and morale in many areas to be high. The staff finds a great deal of job satisfaction in finalizing reports, presenting them to communities in public meetings and news conferences, and seeing safety recommendations implemented. There is a lot of job satisfaction in saving lives.

I want to assure the subcommittee that the board and management are working in a collegial way to do our part to make the CSB a better place to work for those who do express some dissatisfaction with certain policies or processes. I am personally committed -- as are the other board members -- to getting into the field, to meet the investigative teams, and to talk to support staff to let them all know we care about what they are doing and that we are here to help.

We look to provide intrinsic rewards – such as letting people know they are valued, and setting up consistent personnel policies -- where providing extrinsic rewards -- such as pay raises or other benefits -- is not always possible.

The CSB is moving forward as an organization. Employees are encouraged, I believe, by the fact that board members are taking an active role and interest in what they are doing.

I know from experience that these kinds of personnel issues take time and patience to correct. Prior to my appointment in December, I spent over 50 years in the chemical industry in a variety of positions. Most recently I served as a health, safety and environmental consultant to a broad range of companies across the country. And I spent much of my career with BASF Corporation, one of the largest chemical companies in the world.

At BASF, I worked in a variety of roles, including plant management. I completed graduate studies in not only chemical engineering, but I have a Masters of Education and a Masters of Arts from Columbia University in Counseling Psychology for Business and Industry. So I have the experience to work on these issues you have brought up.

For almost a year now, starting well before the beginning of my tenure as a Board Member, the CSB has been working to implement what are known as the Waxman Recommendations. As recommended, we are holding regular briefings and meetings, completed the Chevron investigation very successfully, our action plan has prioritized upcoming CSB cases, and we have streamlined the deployment process.

Very significantly, the CSB internal Workplace Improvement Committee -- members of which were selected by the staff itself – have been meeting regularly to suggest improvements. They have spoken to all staff members. They have made some specific suggestions for improvement that have been or are being implemented, and more are to come. For example, they are creating action items on bringing in new employees, creating a database of CSB best practices, and clarifying employment policies.

I emphasize again that the core work of the agency is being accomplished. Any suggestion to the contrary is not correct. The CSB -- by any benchmarks or metrics -- has been highly productive over the past five years, and particularly in the past year.

The backlog of cases is now down to seven. We closed two more cases in a recent public meeting, and have completed safety videos of our technical investigations that have been viewed tens of thousands of times. We are rapidly closing in on completion of very significant investigations: the West Fertilizer explosion that destroyed a section of West, Texas, the Freedom Industries pollution of the water supply of 300,000 residents in West Virginia, and the final reports on the Deepwater Horizon/Macondo well blowout disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

I will draw to a close by suggesting that morale could be improved even more if two things could happen.

First: We need a new chairperson confirmed, and anything this committee could do to call attention to this need in the other body would be most appreciated. Not only is a nominee for chair pending, but so is the nomination of an additional board member. We will have only two members – myself and Mr. Engler -- after Mr. Griffon's term ends in late June.

Second: We are in need of an increase in our budget in order to hire more investigators to do more investigations in a timely manner. The alternative -- a reduction in our workload -- seems unlikely to happen.

We only have a total of 40 employees, roughly half of them investigators. Between our own criteria for deployment and Congressional requests, we must on occasion pull investigators off one investigation and put them onto new ones on an ad hoc basis. This has caused more than a few morale problems and investigation delays over the years, and has led to unfair criticism about management of the investigations and delays in producing reports. We do not let the quality of the investigations falter, so additional resources are needed to perform the CSB's mission.

The agency has demonstrated time and again that despite the very real limits on our resources, we are able to pivot and re-allocate our investigation assets in response to a catastrophic incident and a request from Congress. This was done most recently in response to a Congressional request for a team to deploy to the ExxonMobil accident in Torrance, California.

This flexibility has been demonstrated repeatedly over the period that is covered by the survey in question, and speaks to a commitment by all CSB employees to meet the demands of the public to provide answers to why chemical accident tragedies have happened.

In summary, I would just reiterate the following:

Good work is being done at the Chemical Safety Board. We are productive, and I believe morale is improving. We look forward to working with you and other Congressional committees to continue to serve the public.

Thank you.