

Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Fentanyl: The Next Wave of the Opioid Crisis”
March 21, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

The opioid crisis has touched every corner of our nation. Just like my colleagues, I have met with community leaders, physicians, first responders, law enforcement, and families on this issue. Each have shared heartbreaking stories on the effects of this crisis in our communities. You see, addiction doesn't understand politics. It doesn't understand income, race, or where someone is from. It is an equal opportunity destroyer. This crisis has hit close to home for each of us.

Last Congress, this committee worked in a bipartisan way to advance sweeping legislation to fight the nation's opioid epidemic. It was an effort that actually began in this subcommittee, which held a series of hearings that examined the growing problems of prescription drug and heroin abuse. We should be proud of those efforts. But as we will discuss today, there is a new threat emerging.

Last year, there were encouraging reports that showed that the number of *prescriptions* for opioids in the United States finally declined – for the first time in 20 years. Yet, we saw the number of opioid-related overdoses and overdose-related deaths continuing to surge upward. Why?

Emerging data strongly suggest the main driver is fentanyl, and its chemical variations. Fentanyl essentially represents a third wave in the nation's ongoing opioid crisis. It's why we are here today.

Fentanyl is a more challenging threat within the opioid crisis, in comparison to the threats of prescription opioids and heroin. The fentanyl threat is multi-faceted. It has been produced as a legitimate pain medication by drug companies for decades. But it is also produced illicitly in black market operations in China. Illicit fentanyl is hard to detect, and unlike prescription painkillers it is not primarily diverted from the legitimate market. Nor is it strictly comparable to the black market of heroin. It can be purchased over the Internet openly, or on the dark web. Precursor chemicals used to make fentanyl are produced in China, and shipped to clandestine labs in Mexico. Drug cartels are smuggling massive amounts of fentanyl with other

narcotics from Mexico across the Southwest border. Drug traffickers in the U.S. not only are getting deliveries of fentanyl from China through the mail or air express carriers, but they are also getting direct or indirect shipments from China of pill presses that can make thousands of pills an hour to fuel their operations and distribution networks into our towns and communities.

Pure fentanyl is not considered a replacement drug for OxyContin or heroin. It is too potent. Just two to three milligrams can kill an individual. More often than not, it is added into heroin, cocaine, or counterfeit drugs to boost the potency and increase the likelihood of addiction. What's even scarier is people taking these drugs may not even know that they are taking fentanyl, let alone what it is.

Fentanyl makes the deadly threat of opioid abuse even deadlier. In 2014 and 2015 in my home state of Oregon, a reported 49 people died from fentanyl. The number of deaths from fentanyl appears to be rising, and that's just what we *know*. As we work to combat this quickly evolving public health threat, there's an important question to be asked. How can we fight this threat when we don't even know how quickly it is spreading?

Combating this growing, multi-faceted fentanyl threat will require more than the drug-control strategies aimed at opioid overprescribing and heroin. Fentanyl is a global problem that requires an urgent response. I commend the efforts of our government, ONDCP, DEA, and the State Department, particularly, for their success in gaining cooperation with China and the United Nations. We need to continue and support this international engagement to be successful. Like our work on the opioid epidemic last Congress, combating fentanyl truly requires an all-hands-on-deck effort.

We need to think outside the box to find ways to stop the surge of the fentanyl crisis. I look forward to your testimony, and working with all of you to solve this problem.