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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

February 25, 2015

The Honorable Elliot Kaye
Chairman
Consumer Product Safety Commission
4330 East West Highway
Bethesda, Maryland 20814

Dear Chairman Kaye:

On February 2, 2015 the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) submitted the Fiscal Year 2016 Performance Budget Request to Congress. The largest element of the budget request is five million dollars for a new nanotechnology research center.

As a student at Rice University in the 1980s, I had the pleasure of being a student in the Father of Nanotechnology, Dr. Richard Smalley's classroom. I am only one of many students that he has inspired and fueled an interest in nanotechnology that continues today. While I am supportive of growing the nanotechnology field, I am concerned about CPSC's budget request.

Nanotechnology is not a simple subject area that is discrete to one industry or product category. As defined by the National Nanotechnology Initiative, nanotechnology is "the understanding and control of matter...at dimensions between approximately 1 and 100 nanometers (one-billionth of a meter)." For example, a sheet of paper is 100,000 nanometers thick. This example illustrates that even though paper can be measured in nanometers, and matter manipulated at that level, there is not an inherent new risk associated with a sheet of paper. One of the exciting things about nanotechnology is the leadership role the United States has played in its development and its potential for job growth across a variety of industries.

The CPSC's budget request caught my attention because it accounts for almost 85% of the proposed budget increase for the agency and almost 4% of the entire CPSC budget. I believe strongly in the importance of clearly identifying measureable metrics of success for programs at the CPSC tied to reducing unreasonable risks of injury or death associated with consumer products when there are limited resources. The request for a major new nanotechnology center is lacking any of this specificity.

According to the budget request the Center for Consumer Product Applications and Safety Implications of Nanotechnology (CPASION) "will be an academically based consortium of scientists focused on supporting the CPSC's unique mission through research directed toward the development of robust methods to identify nanomaterials in consumer products and to understand human exposures to those materials. The research will target the development of methods for quantifying and characterizing the presence, release, and mechanisms of consumer exposure to nanomaterials from consumer products."

The prospect of starting an entire new nanotechnology center at the CPSC is a major undertaking that requires far more detail and examination than the CPSC has provided. Other than the paragraph description above and a comparison to a "similarly sized" Environmental Protection Agency research center, there are scant details in the request about the success metrics or originating research topics for the center outside of "developing test methods to quantify exposures and assess health risks." I am concerned about the Commission's processes to evaluate any work product from the proposed CPASION and what expertise depth exists at the agency around the science of nanotechnology. Any agency wading into a new area should have a strong scientific foundation and expertise for that area and nanotechnology is no exception. There is no indication in the performance budget request who at the Commission or how the Commission would process and evaluate the findings of CPASION. There is no indication of transparency and input from interested parties, either.

With the range of consumer risks in the marketplace, consumers deserve to know that the CPSC is prioritizing unreasonable risks, as mandated by its mission, and allocating staff and funding resources to where it can be most effective, and not in areas where its expertise is suspect. Anything else sends the wrong message and risks the bright future of nanotechnology across the U.S. economy. I would request that the CPSC share a full and detailed budget and operating plan for the CPASION along with a response to the concerns raised above by March 5, 2015.

Very respectfully,



Pete Olson
Member of Congress