

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Alan S. Lowenthal
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Legislative Hearing on

H.R. _____, “Helium Extraction Act of 2017”

June 21, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is a pleasure to be here to discuss helium again – this is definitely one of the bipartisan success stories of this committee, and I am very proud to have been on this committee since the debate and passage of the Helium Stewardship Act, and our ongoing efforts to oversee the implementation of that law.

I feel like some of our witnesses here today are almost old friends – welcome back, Mr. Spisak and Mr. Nelson.

Today we’re not here to talk specifically about that law, however.

We will certainly be watching the Bureau of Land Management’s helium program closely over the next few years, as we approach the 2021 selloff date for the helium reserve, but today we’re here to discuss helium supplies, and how to ensure that we continue to have a robust supply of affordable domestic helium.

I know a lot of people hear “helium” and instantly think “balloons and funny voices.” And don’t get me wrong, for anyone with children or grandchildren that might be by far the most important use of that resource.

But when people hear the word helium, they should also think health care. Because MRIs could not work without liquid helium. Nor could much of the fundamental research that leads to life-saving new drugs. And, for that matter, advances in numerous fields of science. That’s why a coalition of scientific societies recently published a report in which they referred to liquid helium as, quote, “the professional lifeblood of tens of thousands of scientists and engineers across America’s discovery and innovation landscape.”

One of those scientists is here today: Dr. Stuart Brown, from the UCLA Physics and Astronomy Department. Dr. Brown, thank you for coming all the way out here to discuss the importance of helium to your research and to the research community at large.

This is a particularly timely hearing – unexpectedly timely, I would say – because of the situation with Qatar, one of the largest suppliers of helium in the world. I understand there hasn't been a huge impact on the market yet, but there may be soon, and this just highlights the critical importance of having a robust domestic helium production industry.

Unfortunately, the laws and regulations surrounding helium production from federal lands are stuck in the distant past. The law surrounding helium production from oil and gas leases dates back to 1920. The regulations have been unchanged since 1965.

It simply isn't clear if these provide the right structure to encourage helium production, particularly in a future where the federal government no longer owns a helium reserve and can no longer guarantee discounted access to federal helium users, such as the Department of Defense and NASA.

The draft bill we're discussing today appears to fix one problem, but I think we need to take a hard look and ask if this is enough. Are there other laws that might need to be changed to ensure that the United States doesn't become dependent on foreign supplies of this critical and irreplaceable element?

So I believe that this is just the beginning of a discussion, and I hope, Mr. Chairman, that you are willing to look broadly at other potential options, and that we will also work with other committees if necessary to craft legislation that might not be entirely in our jurisdiction.

I thank all the witnesses for being here to give us their perspectives on this issue, and I yield back the balance of my time.