

OPENING STATEMENT

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Full Committee Markup of H.R. 4186, *the FIRST Act of 2014*

May 21, 2014

Thank you, Chairman Smith. Today we are marking up the FIRST Act, which reauthorizes some of the agencies and programs from the America Competes Act. The Competes Act was landmark bipartisan legislation, based on the recommendations of the esteemed National Academies, that sought to ensure America's continued scientific preeminence and grow our innovation economy.

Unfortunately, the FIRST Act falls far short of the legacy of Competes. Where the Competes Act was clearly focused on spurring innovation, the FIRST Act seems preoccupied with questioning the motives of America's premiere science agency and the integrity of the scientists it funds. Where the Competes Act focused on broadly lifting America's commitment to the sciences, the FIRST Act instead seeks to pit different scientific disciplines against one another. Where the Competes Act sought to provide a clear vision and stability to our science agencies, the FIRST Act instead provides them with a year's worth of authorization at levels below those provided by our own Appropriations Committee.

In short, the FIRST Act is an opportunity lost.

That's too bad, Mr. Chairman, because the issues we are dealing with today are important and we need a legislative approach that is equal to the task. It is about believing in our scientific and technical communities who have made so many of the great discoveries and innovations which shape our lives today. And it is about making sustained investments today to ensure our children and grandchildren have the strong innovation economy we have all enjoyed because of prior investments.

That last point is key. I know that some of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle will say that because of our national debt, we can't afford to make these investments in our future. I think that's dead wrong and a false economy. I say we can't afford to not make these investments. In reality, trading a future where America is no longer the world's leader in science and innovation for a slightly lower debt today is a choice to diminish the prospects for our children and grandchildren.

My friend Norm Augustine, the former head of Lockheed-Martin, is fond of comparing the situation to that of an overloaded plane. You don't lighten the load by first throwing off the engines. It's a great comparison because our science agencies are the innovation engines of our economy. Short changing these agencies will only lead to our economy stalling out in the future.

Mr. Chairman, I'm not the only person who thinks there are serious problems with the FIRST Act. Broad coalitions of stakeholders have written to the Committee expressing concern or outright opposition to the FIRST Act.

A short list of these groups includes the Task Force for American Innovation, which includes many of America's leading high-tech companies from all sectors of our economy; the Science Coalition, which is composed of America's leading research universities and scientific societies; the Association of American Universities; the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities; and, the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Moreover, in a move that may have been unprecedented, last month the National Science Board issued a statement outlining its concerns with the FIRST Act.

Maybe those groups felt like they had to write those letters because they didn't have a chance to comment to the Committee at a hearing. When we last reauthorized Competes in 2010 the Committee held scores of hearings on the various aspects of the bill with all manner of outside stakeholders, including the affected agencies.

I would have thought that given the range of concerns expressed about the FIRST Act by a wide range of industry and university stakeholders, the Committee would have scheduled hearings to allow them to present their case and provide an opportunity for Members to question them.

That should have been our highest priority in scheduling hearings, but unfortunately other hearing topics were given precedence, and this legislation is the worse for it.

I can't help but feel that the bill we are marking up today could have been much improved if we had spent a little more time hearing from the scientific and business communities on their thoughts on what they think is needed in the FIRST Act. After all, they are the ones doing the science and developing our high tech products and services. Perhaps we might also have spent that time hearing from the agencies being authorized by this bill.

But instead of listening to the experts and finding out their needs and concerns, and reflecting those concerns in this reauthorization, we have a bill before us today that projects a distrust of scientists and the scientific process. I don't think any of this has reflected well on the

Committee, and it is unfortunate that it has detracted from our ability to develop a good, bipartisan bill.

I do want to note some positive improvements in the NIST and STEM education portions of the bill, and I appreciate Chair and his staff for working with us on those provisions. I wish that cooperation had extended to the rest of the FIRST Act.

In closing, I wish we were at a different point today. More than anything, I would like to support a bipartisan reauthorization of the Competes Act. But I can't support a bill that violates the basic principles that underlay the Competes Act. Unless there are significant changes made to the FIRST Act, I will have to oppose the bill and encourage others to do so as well.

Before I yield back, I have 20 letters from various scientific, academic, and industry associations and societies expressing concern or opposition to the FIRST Act that I ask be inserted into the record.

I yield back.