



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON **SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY**

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Full Committee Hearing:

Building a Safer Antarctic Research Environment

December 6, 2022

Good afternoon to our members and our panelists, and thank you for joining us here today. It has been my honor to chair this Committee for the past four years. For three decades, I have served on this Committee. Over all that time, and prior to my tenure in Washington, I have been passionate about breaking down barriers for women. If left unaddressed, hostile cultures keep women and marginalized individuals from achieving their full potential and hinder our progress. As a result, I can think of no more important hearing than the one we are holding today to conclude my time on the Science Committee.

The U.S. Antarctic Program funds cutting-edge and essential research that cannot take place anywhere but Antarctica. In harsh conditions, geologists peer millions of years into the past by boring deep into the ice sheet. Dark skies offer an unparalleled site to observe distant galaxies. Biologists study life that thrives in extreme conditions on land and under sea.

Unfortunately, the challenges facing scientists in Antarctica are not merely those imposed by the elements. While several Federal agencies support research in Antarctica, the National Science Foundation has the responsibility of managing all U.S. Antarctic research activities. In August, NSF released a report on sexual harassment and assaults in the Antarctic Program. Its findings are sobering. The report contains harrowing stories of individuals enduring threats to their physical safety, gendered taunts, and intimidation. Community members do not trust the agency or contractor to keep them safe from these harms. Multiple people spoke of their fear of being retaliated against for reporting an assault. Survivors and advocates on ice fear they will be placed on a “blacklist.” Meanwhile, high-ranking perpetrators receive apologies instead of penalties. We must not tolerate any culture that enables pervasive harassment and assault. While the Antarctic program presents unique challenges, such challenges must not be used as an excuse for an inadequate response and corrective actions.

I am proud that this Committee passed the Combating Sexual Harassment in Science Act. This became law this summer in the CHIPS & Science Act. But clearly there is more work to be done, including when it comes to the responsibility of Federal contractors. Today we will discuss how all stakeholders must engage with one another and with the Antarctic community. Companies have a responsibility to protect employee privacy. However, NSF must have the necessary information to keep people safe, and to keep offenders off the ice.

The SAHPR (SAPER) report may be focused on Antarctica, but these problems plague field sites beyond that continent. I hope the CHIPS & Science provisions, and what we learn today, serve as a foundation for further action. I've been heartened by the bipartisan action this Committee has taken to address sexual harassment. It is my hope that this work will continue into the next Congress.

Finally, before I yield to Ranking Member Lucas for his statement, I'd just like to close by noting that this is the last full committee hearing that the Science, Space, and Technology Committee will hold in the 117th Congress. It is also the last hearing that I will chair as a Member of Congress. Given that, I just want to take a moment to express my deep appreciation to Members and staff on both sides of the aisle for all they have done to make this one of the most productive Congresses that this Committee has ever had. And in that regard, I want to give a special thanks to Ranking Member Lucas. He has been a constructive partner in what I've tried to accomplish, as well as a good friend. I am confident he will continue the bipartisan approach to the Committee in the 118th Congress that we've had over the past two congresses. And he knows I will be watching him to make sure that he does!

With that, I yield to my friend and colleague, Ranking Member Lucas.