

OPENING STATEMENT  
**Ranking Member Ami Bera (D-CA)**  
**of the Subcommittee on Space**

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology  
Subcommittee on Space  
*“Powering Exploration: An Update on Radioisotope Production and  
Lessons Learned from Cassini”*  
October 4, 2017

Good morning. And welcome to our distinguished panel. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing to examine the status of radioisotope power production for NASA’s mission.

On September 15, 2017, NASA and its partners, the scientific community, and many of the interested public said goodbye to the Cassini spacecraft after a mission that studied the Saturn system for over a decade. That mission yielded significant scientific returns, including indications that Saturn’s moon, Enceladus, may harbor the necessary ingredients to support life. Cassini, and many of the missions that have explored the outer regions of the solar system, including the current New Horizons mission that flew by Pluto, would not have been possible without Radioisotope Power Systems (RPSs).

NASA needs access to Plutonium-238 (Pu-238) because some missions have power requirements that cannot be met by using solar arrays, given the spacecraft’s distance from the Sun, its operating requirements, or in the case of rovers, the conditions on the surface of a planet. Therefore, Mr. Chairman, there is no doubt that access to a constant supply of Pu238 is essential if we are to maintain the nation’s leadership in solar system exploration and scientific discovery.

In the past decade, the nation’s ability to have a dependable access to Pu238 has been a source of concern. The Department of Energy (DOE) stopped producing Pu238 in the late 1980s, and Pu238 was then procured from Russia. But when it was clear that Russian supply would be no longer available, NASA requested in 2011 that DOE restart Pu238 production.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the status of DOE’s Pu238 production process and any issues that must be addressed to ensure the Pu238 supply. In particular,

- Is DOE on track to produce NASA’s supply requirements for Pu238 in the anticipated timeframe?
- What impact would Pu238 shortfalls have on NASA’s planetary science plans and future portfolio?
- Are there mitigating actions available to address the constraints of the Pu238 supply?
- Have NASA and the science community already been making science-limiting decisions based on the Pu238 supply constraints?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.