

OPENING STATEMENT

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Hearing on “The State of the Environment: Evaluating Progress and Priorities”

U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Subcommittee on the Environment

I want to thank Chairman Harris for holding the subcommittee’s first hearing on the state of our environment. This hearing marks an important opportunity to plan for the future, to set the tone for the new Congress in what I hope will be a collaborative effort to ensure our long-term economic vitality and protect human health and our natural resources.

It’s a matter of common sense that we must coordinate research and technological innovation to enhance air and water quality to protect the health of our children and future generations. The First Congressional District of Oregon, which I represent, is a leader in this area, as it is in many fields. In June of 2012 the U.S. Conference of Mayors gave Beaverton, Oregon the Mayors’ Climate Protection Award, and later that year the city received EPA’s 2012 Leadership Award. The State of Oregon has additionally shown that it is committed to protecting human health by reducing harmful emissions, with a statewide goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 10 percent below 1990 levels by 2020, and 75 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

I have read the testimony of the witnesses and their biographies, and I am glad they have come before the committee. They have both enjoyed long careers in the regulatory sector, and I understand from talking to environmental regulators at both the state and federal level that the process of implementing regulations can be both challenging and daunting work. With that said, this Subcommittee, and this hearing in particular, should focus on the science that has led to the successful EPA regulations that are acknowledged by all three witnesses, and those discoveries that are still unknown that may tell us more about how the pollution in our air and water is affecting our health. As technology changes, as our research methodology becomes more accurate, as industries change and new industries are created, as populations grow, new problems will continue to emerge. We will not have all the answers immediately, but as public servants it is our responsibility to continue to investigate.

More than 40 years ago, Congress passed several pieces of landmark legislation to protect our environment: the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. All of these laws passed with bipartisan support. In 1970, it was President Richard M. Nixon who is credited with creating the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA became the lead federal agency with responsibility for implementing these laws and today works in collaboration with other federal and state agencies to protect human health and our environment.

Today, we will hear from our panelists and Subcommittee members on the costs and benefits of environmental protection. Although there are serious questions on which we may disagree, we can all agree that our air and water is cleaner than it was 40 years ago, before the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts became law. But our work is not done.

As we look ahead to future EPA action, including the issuance of new and updated regulations, it is worth reminding ourselves of the source of such regulation and the benefit to society. In that regard, the Clean Air Act's history of protecting public health speaks for itself.

In the four decades since it was signed, the Clean Air Act has prevented hundreds of thousands of premature deaths, not to mention saving trillions of dollars in health care costs. These benefits to the public will continue to grow. Especially in tough economic times, Americans understand the real economic impact. With fewer cases of chronic asthma attacks or bronchitis, fewer children and adults have to visit hospitals and doctors' offices. With the cost of health care widely agreed to be one of the central drivers of our nation's fiscal challenges, we as policymakers would consider this a good result.

The economic impacts of climate change are among the many challenges we face in these times of budget uncertainty. One of the most important issues to address will be how these changes will draw on our resources. If we do not have reliable, scientific information about the impact of climate change, our industries, our farmers, our states and municipalities will be unable to plan for the future. I know that all of my colleagues agree that certainty is good for business.

The environmental laws that we are discussing in this hearing have hardly been the drag on the economy that some predicted when they were passed in the late 60s and early 70s. When Congress rewrote the Federal Water Pollution Control Act into what became the Clean Water Act, one of the biggest threats to our water quality was municipal wastewater. A bipartisan Congress took a very important step by including funding provisions for states and cities to help them build wastewater treatment facilities. It is widely accepted among environmental experts across the country—and noted by both the witnesses for the majority--that cleaning up our nation's waterways has been one of the great successes of the Clean Water Act.

In fact, both majority witnesses make mention of economic growth in the face of environmental regulation in their testimony, using data provided by the EPA. Over the last 20 years, while emissions of the six principal air pollutants were reduced by an additional 41 percent, the nation's Gross Domestic Product has increased by more than 64 percent. Additionally, GDP has risen by more than 200 percent since the Clean Air Act was signed more than 40 years ago. And we not only got cleaner air, but also entirely new technology sectors.

Investment in environmental science, research, education and assessment efforts have been key to promulgating smart, effective regulations, and good science has been critical to protecting the environment as well as human health since the 1970s. Air and water pollution continue to threaten our public and economic health, and we need strong science and research programs at both NOAA and EPA to help us understand the problems and respond. I am interested in hearing how Congress and this subcommittee can best develop programs that suit the needs of our federal agencies, academic institutions and other research and development institutions, while continuing to provide the necessary information to make informed policy decisions.

Quoting Republican President Nixon, who signed the Clean Air Act Amendments into law in 1970: "I think that 1970 will be known as the year of the beginning, in which we really began to move on the problems of clean air and clean water and open spaces for the future generations of America".

Significant progress has been made in the past 40 years, and it is our job now to build upon this legacy and ensure that we continue to improve our environmental quality while bolstering our economy. This is not science fiction; it is our history. In the U.S., a healthy environment and a strong economy are not mutually exclusive. Stricter pollution limits drive us to push the envelope of scientific innovation and create new technologies. And, as it has been proven many times over, they can simultaneously improve worker productivity, increase agricultural yield, reduce mortality and illness, and achieve other economic and public health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance.

Thank you, and I yield back.