



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

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Mikie Sherrill
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Joint Subcommittee Hearing:

EPA's IRIS Program: Reviewing Its Progress and Roadblocks Ahead
March 27, 2019

Good morning, and welcome to the Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee's first hearing of the 116th Congress. I am pleased to work alongside Ranking Member Norman of South Carolina, and look forward to a productive and collaborative relationship. This is also a joint Subcommittee hearing with the Environment Subcommittee, and I'm very pleased to welcome my fellow chair Ms. Fletcher and her counterpart on the Minority, Representative Marshall of Kansas.

I expect this is just the beginning of the cooperative partnership that our Subcommittees will enjoy during this Congress, and I look forward to continuing to work closely with you in the weeks and months ahead.

In this first hearing, we are focusing on a subject that directly impacts the state of public health in this country. The EPA's Integrated Risk Information System, or IRIS, is tasked with developing impartial, science-based assessments on the toxicity of chemicals. It is considered the "gold standard" for chemical toxicity assessments in the United States. Note that IRIS is not itself a risk management program or a regulator. Instead, its findings are used by other branches of EPA and state and local governments to inform guidelines and regulations about what levels of human exposure to a given chemical are acceptable. IRIS has produced toxicity assessments for a multitude of dangerous chemicals, including asbestos, mercury and ethylene oxide, to name just a few.

Unfortunately, we have learned in recent weeks that IRIS is being undercut by political leadership at EPA. America needs a strong, empowered IRIS to provide EPA, states, tribes, municipalities and communities everywhere with the best-available science regarding chemical toxicity. When IRIS is prevented from doing its work, the public is less informed, and therefore less safe.

The public needs IRIS to be independent of outside influence. But the GAO report we will discuss today outlines troubling facts about political interference with IRIS. Political appointees at EPA have blocked the release of IRIS assessments, imposed new bureaucratic hurdles, and reduced the number of priority chemicals for IRIS to evaluate with no explanation. The formaldehyde assessment, in particular, has been ready to be released for over a year. Then-EPA

Administrator Scott Pruitt said so himself in a January 2018 hearing before the Senate. Press reports indicate that IRIS has determined a connection exists between formaldehyde and leukemia. It is unacceptable for political considerations to suppress IRIS's findings. I fail to see any credible reason why findings of fact on chemical risks should be withheld from the public. EPA must release the IRIS formaldehyde assessment as soon as possible.

EPA's management of the IRIS program has prompted concern as well. In October 2018, 28 out of roughly 30 IRIS employees spent 25 to 50 percent of their time working on risk evaluations for a different EPA office. This kind of staff reassignment distracts IRIS from its core mission and deprives IRIS of the resources it needs to address its own work in a timely fashion.

I'm very pleased to welcome the distinguished witnesses appearing here today. In our two panels, we have government officials, eminent scholars and community advocates who see the real-world impact of IRIS assessments. We appreciate your willingness to appear before our Subcommittees today.

Protecting the public from toxic chemicals is a core function of the EPA, and IRIS is vital to EPA's ability to accomplish this mission. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to continue this Committee's work to ensure that IRIS is allowed to do its job for the sake of public health.