

Opening Statement

Research and Technology Subcommittee Markup
H.R. 4186, the FIRST Act

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

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Thank you Mr. Chairman. And I would like to thank you for holding this markup today. The America COMPETES Act was one of the more important pieces of legislation I've worked on during my tenure on this Committee. Scientific research and STEM education are key drivers of our national competitiveness, and the America COMPETES Act was a tremendous bipartisan effort to address these issues in a comprehensive manner.

While I am pleased the Committee is focusing its efforts on research and science education, I am very concerned about the bill being marked up here today. The FIRST Act overall is a missed opportunity that sends the wrong message about our plans to keep America competitive and secure the future for our children and grandchildren. I cannot support it in its current form. I will discuss just a few of my specific concerns here this morning.

First, I am concerned that the bill departs from the prior two America COMPETES bills and the National Academies report "Rising Above the Gathering Storm" in authorizing below inflationary funding levels for NSF and NIST. Sustained increases in funding for NSF, NIST, and DOE's Office of Science was a key part of the recommendations of the well regarded National Academies panel back in 2006.

Instead, this bill would essentially lock the agencies into their current funding levels for an additional year and sets no path for increases in the future as our economy continues to recover. I am also adamantly opposed to the sharp budget cuts for the social sciences and the geosciences. There is no legitimate scientific reason for these cuts. These are politically motivated cuts to appease a conservative ideology that doesn't believe in certain kinds of science, and I cannot support them.

The FIRST Act also contains so-called accountability provisions that are solutions in search of problems, in some cases with likely unintended consequences, including impeding the ability of agencies to appropriately respond to scientific fraud. The collective message sent by these provisions is that we don't trust scientists because they are all out to game the system and commit fraud. Is this really the message the Science Committee wants to be sending?

I also have serious concerns with the provisions relating to public access to research results and data. As we all know, the Administration has been engaged in a multiyear process on these issues with considerable input from a wide range of stakeholders. The Majority has chosen to ignore the work OSTP has been doing and instead advance its own agenda. Several groups, including the two associations representing the majority of U.S. research universities have expressed serious concerns with the Majority's public access provision and I share those concerns.

Finally, I want to highlight something that's not in the bill: DOE programs. The Office of Science and ARPA-E were authorized in both of the prior COMPETES authorizations, and this was consistent with the "Rising Above the Gathering Storm" report. However, the Majority decided early on last year to split DOE out with the stated intent of moving those authorizations as part of a larger energy package. Given where things stand now, I don't see much chance for passage of comprehensive energy legislation this session. I hope the Chairman will reconsider the idea of moving the Office of Science and ARPA-E as a part of today's legislation as we move forward.

These are a few of my concerns with the FIRST Act. I know that several Subcommittee Members will be offering good amendments today. However, unless my major concerns with the bill are addressed, I still will be unable to support it.

I, along with the Democratic Caucus of the Committee have introduced an alternative bill, H.R. 4159, the America COMPETES Reauthorization Act of 2014. Our bill would rectify each of the issues I've mentioned today and more. The issue of national competitiveness should be a bipartisan one, and I hope that as we move forward, the provisions of these bills can be reconciled and we can generate a truly bipartisan measure, as we have in the past.

Mr. Chairman, I have several letters from different organizations opposed to the FIRST Act, including: The American Association for the Advancement of Science, The Association of American Universities, The Coalition for National Science Funding, The Union of Concerned Scientists, The American Geophysical Union, The American Physical Society, The American Society for Civil Engineers, The Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences, The Consortium of Social Science Associations, and The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Research Coalition.

I'd ask that these be placed in the record.

Thank you, and I yield back.