

Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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January 7, 2022

Dr. J. Stephen Binkley  
Acting Director  
Office of Science  
United States Department of Energy  
1000 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Director Binkley:

We are writing to learn more about the Department of Energy's (the Department) efforts to implement the low-dose radiation research program, as authorized by the Department of Energy Research and Innovation Act<sup>1</sup> and the amendments made by the Energy Act of 2020.<sup>2</sup>

As you know, the Department's Office of Science established this program in 1998 to support research on the effects of low doses of radiation on biological systems.<sup>3</sup> Despite the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee's bipartisan support for this program and the potential benefits of its research,<sup>4</sup> the Department proposed terminating funding for the program in 2016.<sup>5</sup>

Humans face radiation exposure from a number of natural and made-made sources, but a lack of knowledge on the biological effects from low levels of radiation persists. Fundamental research on the impacts of low levels of radiation can improve our ability to make informed, science-based decisions on energy production, maintenance of our nuclear weapons program, and national security measures. This research could also better inform decisions for medical treatments involving radiation, and for occupational health conditions for radiation workers,

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Energy Research and Innovation Act § 306(c), 42 U.S.C. 18644(c).

<sup>2</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. Z, § 11001 (2020).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-17-546, LOW-DOSE RADIATION: INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION ON PLANNING RESEARCH COULD IMPROVE INFORMATION ON HEALTH EFFECTS 26 (2017).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., *The Future of Low-Dose Radiation Research: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Energy of the H. Comm. on Sci., Space, and Tech.*, 115<sup>th</sup> Cong. 4-10 (2017) (statements of Rep. Randy Weber, Chairman, Subcommittee on Energy, and Rep. Bill Foster).

<sup>5</sup> See U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, *supra* note 3, at 27.

including the workers who administer such medical treatments. This is important not only for our districts, but across America. It is also critical to advancing our space exploration programs.

In 2018, Congress authorized the low-dose radiation research program as part of the Department of Energy Research and Innovation Act.<sup>6</sup> This legislation, bolstered by bipartisan support, ordered the Director of the Department’s Office of Science to “carry out a research program on low-dose radiation” in order to “enhance the scientific understanding of, and reduce uncertainties associated with, the effects of exposure to low-dose radiation to inform risk-management methods.”<sup>7</sup>

Last year, Congress again voiced its bipartisan support for the low-dose radiation research program in passing the Energy Act of 2020.<sup>8</sup> This legislation builds upon the Department of Energy Research and Innovation Act to require and provide specific direction for the Secretary of Energy to carry out a research program on low-dose and low dose-rate radiation. This legislation also provided detailed direction for this program and included robust authorization of funding from within the Office of Science’s Biological and Environmental Research Program through Fiscal Year 2024 to carry out this work.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this explicit direction from Congress, we are concerned that the Department has shown resistance in implementing this statutorily mandated program. Recent Department activity has reinforced these concerns. The Department’s budget request for the Office of Science for Fiscal Year 2022 contains no mention of this program.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, at a recent meeting of the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM), held to inform the development of a long-term strategic and prioritized research agenda for the low-dose radiation research program, as directed by the Energy Act of 2020,<sup>11</sup> members of the NASEM panel had an opportunity to speak with Dr. Todd Anderson, Director of the Biological Systems Science Division of the Office of Biological and Environmental Research within the Office of Science.<sup>12</sup> When questioned on the Department’s “reluctance” to develop this program, Director Anderson responded that based on a review of previous Department budget requests, he did not “see [the low-dose program] as a priority”.<sup>13</sup> He later stated that the Office of Science “[has] not had...an element in low-dose in the portfolio” and “[the low-dose radiation research program] has not been brought in at higher up planning stages.”<sup>14</sup> He then concluded, “Most of our work is squarely in the bioenergy, bioproduct, and bioeconomy space right now.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pub. L. No. 115-246, § 306(c), 132 Stat. 3130, 3148 (2018).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. Z, § 11001 (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 § 11001.

<sup>10</sup> See DEP’T OF ENERGY, FY 2022 CONG. BUDGET REQUEST, vol. 4 (2021).

<sup>11</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 § 11001;.

<sup>12</sup> Nat’l Academies of Sciences, Eng’g, and Med., Developing a Long-Term Strategy for Low-Dose Radiation Research in the United States – Meeting 1 (July 21, 2021), *available at* <https://www.nationalacademies.org/event/07-21-2021/long-term-strategy-for-low-dose-radiation-research-in-the-united-states-meeting-1-july-21-2021>.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* (exchange starts at 28:34 of video).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* (exchange starts at 38:30 of video).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

As such, we are seeking an update on the Department's progress in implementing the low-dose radiation research program. Please provide the following information to the Committee no later than February 7, 2022:

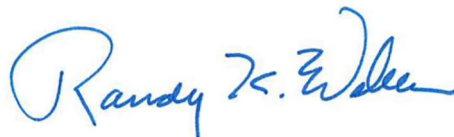
1. A description of all activities that the Office of Science has performed to implement the low-dose radiation research program, pursuant to section 306 of the Department of Energy Research and Innovation Act and amendments made by the Energy Act of 2020, from September 28, 2018, to the present;
2. The names and titles of all Office of Science employees or contractors who have performed activities to implement this program, as well as a brief description of their roles; and
3. A description of any additional staffing needs that would be required to fully implement this program.

We also request that you provide a briefing to update Committee staff on the status of the program and ask that you please provide this as soon as possible, but no later than the date above. If you have any questions related to this request, please contact Alyse Huffman of the Majority staff at (202) 779-0542 or Christen Harsha of the Minority staff at (202) 225-6371. Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Rep. Jamaal Bowman  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Energy



Rep. Randy Weber  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Energy