COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH

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Statement of Oversight Subcommittee Chairman Paul Broun M.D. (R-Ga.)
Hearing on Status of Reforms to EPA's Integrated Risk Information System

Chairman Broun: Good afternoon. I want to welcome and thank all of our witnesses for being here today.

Over the past decade, this Committee has held many oversight hearings to examine the EPA's Integrated Risk Information System, or IRIS program. As you all know, IRIS was established three decades ago to provide a single source of information on the risks associated with exposure to environmental chemicals for use by EPA regulatory offices, states, the international community, and industry. Unfortunately, the program has come under increased scrutiny as a result of issues related to the pace of assessments, lack of transparency, failure to develop and use consistent approaches to weighing evidence, and characterizing risks in a manner divorced from actual human exposures.

This scrutiny has come in many forms: internally, from EPA program offices - who have established their own chemical assessments separate from IRIS - as well as other federal agencies, including the White House, and externally, from stakeholder groups who have increasingly weighed in to express their concerns about IRIS assessments. Even the U.S. Government Accountability Office placed the program on its High-Risk series, a list it provides to Congress every two years, for being at high risk for waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement or in need of broad-based transformation.

Congress, and especially this Committee, has shined the spotlight on the IRIS program for several years, particularly as the National Research Council has been directed to review some of the more complex and challenging IRIS assessments. One such example is the 2011 formaldehyde assessment. When the NRC published that review, it went beyond its charge to add a very pointed and critical Chapter Seven in the report that offered recommendations and suggestions on how EPA could improve the IRIS process. That eventually led to the NRC report published this May, which identified "substantial improvements" in the initial stages of EPA's proposed changes to the IRIS program.

That is quite a turn-around from the 2011 report, and I was pleased to read that, just as I was pleased when EPA announced two years ago that it had tapped Dr. Ken Olden to lead the agency's National Center for Environmental Assessment. Dr. Olden has been a refreshing ambassador for the IRIS program and I applaud his commitment to an open and transparent IRIS process that includes early communication and increased opportunities for meaningful stakeholder input.

But it is clear that the objective of transparency is not a sentiment shared by all. Unfortunately, we have seen opposition to openness, transparency, and greater public comment from some corners. Sunshine is the only way to ensure that this reform effort succeeds, and anti-industry conspiracy theories and the boycotting of public meetings do not help the program improve. Dr. Olden and his staff should be commended for opening up the process to all stakeholders.

With that, I am interested in learning more about EPA's timeline on when it expects to complete its reform process, and more importantly, when it will publish IRIS assessments that reflect the recommendations and suggestions offered by the NRC to substantially improve the program. IRIS will be considered a success when the science behind the assessments is viewed by all stakeholders as rigorous and accurate. The real metric for progress for IRIS should be the actual content of the assessments. Are they credible? Do they correctly characterize risk and uncertainty? Can users trust them? Are they overly conservative in a way that limits the options available to risk managers? If EPA develops useful guidelines, handbooks, or policies, then fails to consistently follow them, we will have spent years and millions of dollars to reform IRIS on paper.

As a physician, I understand how important it is to ensure the best possible scientific methods are being utilized to protect our most sensitive populations, including, children, pregnant women, and the elderly, from undue harm. Because of its widespread use, we must be certain that the IRIS program is using the best possible science and scientific process in a timely fashion to publish assessments that engender confidence by all stakeholders. Anything less than that is a mission not accomplished.

Thank you. I now recognize the Ranking Member, the gentleman from New York, Mr. Maffei, for an opening statement.