

COMMITTEE ON  
**SCIENCE, SPACE, AND  
TECHNOLOGY**  
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH



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**Statement of Research and Technology Subcommittee Chairwoman Barbara Comstock (R-Va.)**  
*NSF's Oversight of the NEON Project and Other Major Research Facilities*  
*Developed Under Cooperative Agreements*

**Chairwoman Comstock:** Thank you Chairman Loudermilk, for convening this hearing, and let me congratulate you on your chairmanship and on your first hearing on this very important topic.

While I was not here for the first NEON hearing the Committee held in December, I have reviewed the testimony from that hearing and familiarized myself with the relevant issues in preparation for this hearing. The independent audit findings and other information about management of the NEON project show some taxpayer funds that were intended to support scientific research were diverted to problematic activities.

The National Science Foundation and the National Ecological Observatory Network have a Cooperative Agreement in the neighborhood of \$433 million. A relatively small amount of that amount – several hundred thousand dollars – has been diverted to pay for things that don't support or strengthen the project: for instance, gourmet coffee service, tens of thousands of dollars for at least one lavish Christmas party, and additional hundreds of thousands of dollars for lobbying expenses.

Our national debt exceeds \$18 trillion. Annual budget deficits of several hundred billion dollars per year are driving up the national debt at a fast clip.

Support for basic research is one of the most important areas of federal discretionary spending. Maintaining American leadership in science and innovation is the key to our nation's future economic prosperity and security. Basic research is about good jobs and a secure future. But in the current budget environment, just maintaining the current level of basic research support is a big challenge.

Our committee authorizes funding for groundbreaking research financed by grants through the National Science Foundation. We have a constitutional obligation and a responsibility to ensure every dollar earmarked for scientific research is spent as effectively and efficiently as possible.

We want to be strong advocates for science, but the situation we will discuss today makes it more difficult to build and maintain support for science funding. We want to be strong advocates for federal support of basic research that advances science and the national interest. But that advocacy is made more complicated when our constituents learn of taxpayer dollars diverted to parties and lobbying.

It may be that nothing illegal has occurred, but taxpayer money has been spent (very) inappropriately. I look forward to hearing from NSF and NEON representatives about what went wrong and, even more, about what steps, including new legislation and new regulations, must be taken to ensure these problems never happen again.