

OPENING STATEMENT
The Honorable Paul Broun, M.D. (R-GA), Chairman
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
*“EPA’s IRIS Program:
Evaluating the Science and Process Behind Chemical Risk Assessment”*

July 14, 2011

Good morning. I want to welcome our witnesses here today.

This hearing continues the committee’s work on the EPA’s Integrated Risk Information System, or “IRIS.” The Committee has held a number of hearings over the last few years on IRIS’s ability to produce risk assessments associated with exposure to chemicals. In 2009, GAO placed the program on its High Risk Series because EPA was unable to complete timely, credible chemical assessments or decrease its backlog of ongoing assessments.

Over the last decade, the IRIS program has gone through a number of changes – particularly to the process by which its assessments are reviewed. These changes were meant to address the inappropriate influence of the White House, regulated agencies, and industry on the IRIS process – the argument being that these entities were preventing assessments from being finalized. Despite these changes, the process implemented by EPA in 2009 still allows for White House input, and the program still has a backlog of over 70 assessments – unchanged from the previous administration.

While EPA seems to be taking steps to adopt the recommendations of GAO regarding outside review, they have uniformly ignored the recommendations of another body – the National Academy of Sciences. For several years now, they too have offered recommendations related to IRIS. These recommendations, however, did not focus on the review process, but rather on how EPA develops the draft assessments in the first place. Time-and-time-again, draft assessments were sent to the NAS for review, only to be severely criticized. Rather than adopting the recommendations of the Academy, and updating their processes, EPA continued to churn out assessments that were summarily rebuked.

As I stated at our 2009 hearing, “[t]he competing priorities of issuing assessments in a timely manner and producing assessments that are scientifically credible are central to the problems we face today.” That statement remains just as true today as it did two years ago. Up until now, EPA has blamed outside forces for the failures of the program. In reality, they too are to blame. The program’s credibility is threatened when it continually puts forth assessments that fail to address fundamental issues raised by reviewers. If, as the old adage goes, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result, then this program needs some therapy.

Adopting the NAS recommendations is the first step to restoring the program’s credibility. EPA’s announcement two days ago is a step in the right direction, but the program’s success hinges on its implementation. As the Academy noted in its formaldehyde report, many of the

concepts and approaches they recommended are elementary and **already exist in EPA's guidelines**. They went on to state "the current state of the formaldehyde draft IRIS assessment suggests that there might be a problem with the practical implementation of the guidelines in completing the IRIS assessments."

Following through is the key here. It is up to the EPA to not only adopt the NAS recommendations, but to also follow its own existing guidelines. This Committee will continue its oversight of the IRIS program to ensure that EPA not only adopts the NAS recommendations, but that it follows guidelines already in existence, and continuously seeks to employ the most modern, credible methods and protocols to assess chemical risks.

I have a lot of questions about this program and where it is headed. As GAO stated in their testimony in 2009, "EPA needs to hold itself more accountable to the public and Congress for carrying out this important component of its mission, **especially since the IRIS program is discretionary.**"

As a physician myself, I understand the stakes we are dealing with – particularly for sensitive populations such as children, pregnant women, and the elderly. I want to make sure they are protected from undue harm. I also am aware of the damage caused by overly conservative measures that scare our citizens without reason, ultimately doing nothing to advance safety. The opening line of the NAS's report titled *Science and Decisions* stated, "[v]irtually every aspect of life involves risk." It is how we assess and manage that risk that ensures our safety.

I now recognize the Ranking Member from Maryland for her opening statement.

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