

OPENING STATEMENT

The Honorable Mo Brooks (R-AL), Chairman

Subcommittee on Research and Science Education

The Merit Review Process: Ensuring Limited Federal Resources are Invested in the Best Science

July 26, 2011

Good morning, and welcome to each of our witnesses. Our hearing today presents us with an opportunity to examine the merit review process for awarding federal grant funds. It is our goal to highlight the benefits of the process, while acknowledging that no process involving human decision-making is flawless. The focus of today's hearing will primarily be on the merit-review process at the National Science Foundation (NSF).

The National Science Foundation Act of 1950 directs NSF to "to initiate and support basic scientific research and programs to strengthen scientific research potential and science education programs at all levels." NSF works to accomplish this Congressional directive through the issuance of merit-based awards to researchers, educators and students at approximately 1,900 U.S. colleges, universities and other institutions. In 1994, the National Academies touted it as being among "the best procedures known for insuring the technical excellence of research projects that receive public support," but the process has changed since then, and we need to make sure that is still the case.

As we know, a large number of potentially fundable proposals are declined each year. The Foundation received over 55,000 proposals for funding in Fiscal Year 2010 and funded nearly 13,000, or 23 percent, of them. Many of the proposals received were not worthy of federal funding, but it is also true that many were not funded because federal funds are limited. So, given that those limited dollars should go to the very best scientific research, NSF must maintain a robust and transparent merit review process.

Today, our witnesses will share their thoughts on how the process works and its strengths and weaknesses. We want to know if the current process spurs or stifles innovation, how award decisions are actually made after receiving peer review, and if there are flaws in the system that may be providing precious federal funds to lower rated proposals over more highly rated proposals.

In exercising its oversight role, this Subcommittee must ensure that federal dollars are being spent on the best science. This examination of the merit review process will help us to understand how programmatic funding decisions are made and how, in turn, those decisions interact with Foundation-wide priorities.

I look forward to hearing from each of our witnesses on this important topic, thank you for joining us.