

**Opening Statement of Ranking Member Hall
Committee on Science and Technology**

*“The Department of Energy's Support for the
Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL), Part II”*

August 1, 2007

I want to welcome our witnesses here today to discuss the future of the Savannah River Ecology Lab (SREL). SREL is a University of Georgia (UGA) facility located on the Department of Energy's (DOE's) Savannah River Site that independently evaluates the ecological effects of site operations through a program of ecological research, education, and outreach. SREL has provided these services since 1951 when it was established by Dr. Eugene Odom.

The facility was initially supported by defense programs, then by DOE's Office of Environmental Management in the 1990's, and eventually DOE's Office of Science in 2003. In 2005, the Office of Science cut funding for the lab after they were faced with difficult budget choices. After learning that SREL funding for FY06 had been “zeroed-out,” Mr. Charles Anderson, Ms. Jill Sigal, and others took it upon themselves to secure enough short-term funding to keep the lab open, resuscitating SREL to the tune of \$4.3 million for FY06 and \$1 million for FY07. While these figures were obviously below prior funding levels, the starting point was \$0, and all of the interested parties – DOE, SREL, UGA, and the Georgia and South Carolina delegations – agreed to them. It clearly was their hope that this additional time would give the lab the opportunity to seek enough outside funding to become independent.

In return for these concessions, the Georgia and South Carolina Congressional delegations agreed not to seek additional earmarks and assured DOE that SREL would become self-sufficient after FY07. As Dr. Bertsch was quoted in a University of Georgia Faculty and Staff Newspaper article on July 11, 2005, “We are sorry to see these fine staff members lose their positions, but if the federal grant must end, we are grateful that our congressional delegations have seen fit to give us a year to develop alternative funding sources.” Additionally, the Georgia and South Carolina congressional delegations expressed satisfaction with the agreement and appreciation towards Secretary Bodman and his staff in a June 28, 2005 press release.

Unfortunately, the terms of the agreement were never conveyed to the Savannah River Site (SRS). Because of this, the original cooperative agreement negotiated between SRS and UGA assumed out-year funding levels similar to previous years. Without knowing of the previous negotiation, the SRS Manager even told SREL to assume they would receive \$4 million in FY07 for budget planning purposes. When DOE Headquarters eventually learned of the cooperative agreement in the fall of 2006 it was rejected for not reflecting the conditions of the negotiation in 2005. Shortly thereafter a new cooperative agreement was signed that provided SREL with \$1 million for infrastructure in FY07,

with the ability to compete for additional funding for tasks based on “need, merit, and funding availability.”

While the Cooperative Agreement was negotiated, SRS and SREL staffs worked hard to “projectize” SREL’s existing work so they could be submitted as proposals to DOE program managers for funding. After they were initially submitted, DOE then developed a higher standard for the projects to meet. No longer were they required to just meet a site need, now they were required to be “mission critical.” This higher standard eventually led to only 6 of the final 27 proposed tasks being funded by DOE. While the difference between “need” and “mission critical” could be purely semantic, I hope we will be able to determine what was really intended today. Eventually, the result of their assessment was that SREL would only receive around \$1.8 million in FY07. Because of this, UGA decided to significantly reduce SREL’s core laboratory functions in June of this year.

No one wants to see SREL close. As we learned at the first hearing on this topic, the science they do is world-class, and the people that work there are of the highest caliber. Unfortunately DOE’s Office of Science had to make hard choices in the FY06 budget cycle. DOE’s Office of Environmental Management stepped up to the plate in FY06 and FY07 to serve as a stop-gap that kept SREL open for a couple more years so it could reinvent itself – something the Office of Science was trying to get SREL to do even before that. That being said, the lab is ultimately a UGA facility and they will decide the lab’s fate. DOE is simply a customer of the lab’s services. It is my hope that we can actually find a way to ensure that SREL stays open so that it can keep providing services to DOE, as well as many other agencies. I hope the testimony today will shed some light on how we can do just that.