



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON  
**SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY**

Opening Statement

**Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)**

Full Committee Hearing:

*Experts Needed: Options for Improved Science and Technology Advice for Congress*

Thursday, December 5

Good morning and welcome to our witnesses. The history of a technology assessment function within the legislative branch is tied to our own Committee's early history. Beginning in the mid-1960's the Committee's then existing Subcommittee on Science, Research, and Development organized a series of hearings on the relationship between science, technology, and society, and the need for Congress to be informed about emerging technology risks.

Several years, and many hearings and reports later, Congress enacted the Technology Assessment Act of 1972, creating the Office of Technology Assessment. During its 20 years of operation, OTA created 700 reports on the science and technology relevant to issues of importance to Congress.

As we all know, the OTA was defunded and disbanded in 1995. My friend and former Republican colleague, Congressman Sherry Boehlert, defended the OTA during the debate to defund it. In his remarks, he questioned the wisdom of disbanding OTA, arguing that the public wanted us to do more with less, not to do more knowing less.

Today, the Science, Space, and Technology Committee has its own expert staff, many of whom have PhDs, to help Members of this Committee navigate tough science and technology issues. Science Committee staff also serve as a resource for personal offices across the House, and in some case for other Committees. But Committee staff are not a replacement for OTA. Our Committee and others also rely heavily on expertise at the executive branch agencies and from entities outside of government, such as the National Academies. But the fact is, much of the information we receive from outside sources comes from individuals or organizations with a particular point of view that we must sort through. We also turn to GAO to fill some of our science and technology needs. However, GAO is still far from filling the gap left by the defunding of OTA. In short, since 1995 there has not been a single, trusted, comprehensive and authoritative source of science and technology advice for Congress.

Since its disbanding, there have been a few persistent champions for bringing back the OTA. In the last couple of years, those few voices have become a chorus, with support from both ends of

the political spectrum. The reason is clear. With every passing year, scientific and technological issues are becoming more complex and with increasing societal impacts. Absent an OTA, we are often left struggling to make sense of competing expert opinions but still having to make policy decisions in this murky context, with potentially grave consequences. The alternative is to be paralyzed into inaction, ceding decision making to the private sector or to other countries, including our adversaries.

Today's discussion will cover a range of topics relevant to how Congress receives and uses scientific and technical advice. And these topics are all important. However, the central question for today's hearing is this: do we bring back a modernized OTA, or do we provide GAO with additional mandates and resources to fill the gap? My hope is that in addressing this question, we can temporarily set aside questions of what is politically expedient and get to the core arguments weighing in favor and against each option for meeting the needs of Congress. In other words, I hope this hearing emulates the practice followed by OTA in providing this Committee with sound policy options, while leaving it to Congress to figure out the politics.

While we no longer have legislative jurisdiction, it is appropriate that 55 years after the first hearings, the Science Committee continues to lead this discussion. I thank the expert witnesses for being here and I look forward to your testimony.