

Ranking Member Miller
Opening Statement
Energy and Environment Subcommittee Markup
HABHRCA Act Reauthorization
Thursday, July 14, 2011

Thank you. Mr. Harris.

In June this Subcommittee heard expert witnesses testify on how the rapid overproduction of algae can have devastating impacts on aquatic plant and animal life, as well as human health. Unfortunately, despite years of research and growing public awareness, the frequency and duration of harmful algal blooms and hypoxia is on the rise, and affecting more of our coastlines and inland waters than ever before. In fact, just last month, the esteemed senior senator from Oklahoma and frequent contributor to the debate on environmental policy, Senator Inhofe, was made “deathly sick” by swimming in a toxic algae outbreak in a lake in his home state.

Recognizing the growing threat, we began work on the reauthorization of the Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Act in the last Congress, with the bill ultimately passing the House but stalling in the Senate. In some regards, today is a continuation of that effort. As with that bill, the bill before us today directs NOAA to implement research strategies and action plans to better understand and respond to these harmful blooms and hypoxic events.

NOAA and the research community have made notable strides in advancing our understanding of harmful algae, and, under intense budget constraints, they have managed to devise a range of innovative solutions. The question for us is when will we stop paying lip service to this problem, take it seriously, and put our money where our mouth is? Scientific research and practicable response strategies don’t come for free. From oyster farmers to swimming senators, the public expects more from us.

That said, given the importance of this research to the Chesapeake Bay watershed – your district, Mr. Chairman – I am surprised that your bill does not even, at minimum, sustain funding at its current level. Despite acknowledging the risk of HABs, you choose to make even further cuts to already struggling programs, actually rewinding funding to lower than 2008 spending levels. By what logic does that solve the problem?

I look forward to discussing the bill more when we bring it up here for consideration. But if we are going to say we care about this research, and that we care enough about the impacts of HABs of coasts and inland waters to take action, then we actually have to invest in a way that will move this research forward and advance our understanding of these blooms and the hypoxic events they cause. Otherwise, it might actually be better if we didn’t care so much.

The research community and the populations they serve have made it clear that they need this bill, and that it is important that we pass a piece of legislation that is both helpful to them and responsive to the problem. Right now, I cannot claim that this bill does either of those.

Thank you Mr. Harris and I look forward to a productive markup and hope that we can find a way to make these programs even more, and certainly not less, effective.