COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Lamar Smith, Chairman

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Statement from Lamar Smith (R-Texas)

Head Health Challenge: Preventing Head Trauma from Football Field to Shop Floor to Battlefield

Chairman Smith: The Science Committee has a longstanding, bipartisan interest in the use of science prizes and challenge competitions to address difficult national problems.

The American Innovation and Competitiveness Act, signed into law in January of this year, included provisions from our committee that streamlined and improved how federal agencies participate in science prize competitions.

Our committee is particularly supportive of the Head Health Challenge due to the involvement of the National Institute of Standards and Technology, or NIST, over which we have jurisdiction.

NIST has been a leader among federal science agencies in challenge prizes and science competitions, including private-public and multi-agency initiatives.

Science prizes aren't new. At a Science Committee hearing last Congress, curators from the Smithsonian brought the original $25,000 prize check earned by Charles Lindbergh for his solo, non-stop flight from New York to Paris in 1927.

At the time, Lindbergh's daring feat and the $25,000 prize attracted a lot of attention. But few people understood what we know today, that Lindbergh's achievement launched the age of aviation and the aerospace industry.

Scientific prizes and challenges are proven approaches for spurring innovation and solving problems. As we will hear this morning, collaboration between the federal government and the private sector adds credibility and is often the best way to trigger breakthroughs.

Our witnesses will tell us about the final phase of the Head Health Challenge, a challenge prize sponsored by NIST, the National Football League, Under Armour and General Electric.

The objective of this challenge is to accelerate the design and development of advanced materials for helmets, pads and other products that protect against head injuries.

Better design and materials for helmets and other protective gear can reduce head injury risks in many occupations: these include all sports and at all levels of competition, high-risk jobs like construction, manufacturing, and forestry, first responders, frail elderly individuals and, importantly, our American soldiers.

DOD estimates that 22 percent of combat casualties from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan involved brain injuries, compared to 12 percent of Vietnam-related combat casualties. Improved helmet protection is one of the best steps we can take as a nation to improve the quality of life for our military veterans.

Preventing or minimizing head injuries is also an important public health and safety issue for children on bicycles, for amateur and professional athletes, for fire and police personnel and for men and women of all ages and all walks of life.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the success of the Head Health Challenge.

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