

Opening Statement
The Honorable Paul Broun (R-GA), Ranking Member
Committee on Science and Technology
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
Caught by Surprise: Causes and Consequences of the Helium-3 Supply Crisis

April 22, 2010

Let me welcome our witnesses here today and thank them for appearing. I wish I could say that I was glad we were holding this hearing, but unfortunately I'm not.

During a hearing last fall on the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office's (DNDO's) Advance Spectroscopic Portal Program (ASP), this subcommittee was notified of the state of the Nation's helium-3 supply and the shortfall's effect on national security – particularly nuclear detection. This by itself was a troubling revelation, but the impact of insufficient helium-3 supplies is not limited to the national security sector. Medical treatments, oil and gas exploration, cryogenics, and other research endeavors have all come to depend on helium-3 because of its historical abundance as a byproduct of our nuclear weapons program.

For years, helium-3 was a cheap and plentiful resource that was ideal for many applications because of its intrinsic properties. Until only recently, the U.S. was continually building up its stockpile, but a number of issues combined to change that trend. The drawdown of our nation's nuclear weapons stockpile after the cold war; the increased priority on domestic nuclear detection brought about by September 11th, 2001; the demand created by neutron scattering facilities; and Russia's decision to cease exports all combined to create the perfect storm for helium-3.

DHS, DOE, and DOD initiated processes to limit demand, ration existing supplies, and find alternatives, but these actions were after the fact. As this committee has seen before with rare earth elements, medical isotopes, and plutonium-238, mitigation efforts are taken after the crisis has already emerged. In the future, the federal government needs to do a better job of projecting both the demand for isotopes in its control, and its own needs of those isotopes and elements that are not. This becomes even more important with the President's recent nuclear arms reduction pact with Russia.

I look forward to working with the Chairman to ensure that the federal government does a better job of predicting and mitigating these supply shortages. To this end, I hope that the agencies assist this committee in meeting its oversight responsibilities in a more cooperative fashion. To date, the documents provided to the committee in response to the Chairman's requests contain unexplained redactions. It is also my understanding that not all documents have been provided. In order for this committee to do its work, the agencies and the Administration need to either provide the documents requested, or claim a legally recognized privilege so that we can move forward.

Thank you, I yield back the balance of my time.

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