

Opening Statement
Rep. Paul Broun (R-GA), Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
House Committee on Science and Technology
Hearing on *“ATSDR: Problems in the Past, Potential for the Future?”*

March 12, 2009

Good morning. I want to welcome our witnesses here today, and thank the Chairman for holding this hearing. I share the Chairman’s concern with public health and safety issues, not only as a legislator, but also as a physician. Our constituents deserve to know whether their families are being exposed to harmful levels of toxic chemicals.

As the Chairman noted, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) is no stranger to this Committee. The Subcommittee’s previous inquiry into the health consultation report for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regarding formaldehyde in trailers, and the Agency’s work regarding toxic releases in the Great Lakes Region, pointed to weaknesses in ATSDR’s scientific review process as well as how they convey information to the public.

Because of these concerns, ATSDR initiated internal reviews of these efforts and the Committee tasked GAO to review the Agency’s processes. Dr. Frumkin will update us on his Agency’s efforts today, but we will have to wait for GAO’s results for a few more months.

Until then, I hope the witnesses here today can help this Committee, and the general public, better understand:

- the Agency’s original mandate and how that has evolved since it’s inception,
- the public’s expectations for the Agency, and
- the effects of increasing numbers of petitions to the Agency.

Understanding and communicating these fundamental points are the first steps in evaluating the effectiveness of ATSDR. While the work the Agency does is crucially important, it is also very difficult. Determining causation and making health risk determinations is not always black-and-white. Despite the complexity of their work, the public deserves to have an Agency they trust.

The issues we discuss today are not simply academic. Much like the witnesses on the first panel today, many of my constituents turn to ATSDR for answers about the effects of their local environment on their family’s health. Recently, Jill McElheney, a constituent of mine, contacted me regarding her experiences with ATSDR, the EPA, and the State of Georgia. The heartbreaking story of her son’s battle with childhood leukemia and the possibility that chemicals from a nearby industrial facility could have influenced his condition is cause enough for all of us to take notice.

I hope this hearing will help us shed light not only on how the Agency can better protect public health and safety, but also how it can adapt to its evolving mission, and the appropriateness of this evolution. Additionally, I hope the witnesses can help us understand how the Agency can better coordinate with community organizations, other Executive Branch Agencies, and state and local health departments. Aside from ensuring that science is always at the center of the Agency’s work, understanding expectations and effectively communicating with the public is key to making sure ATSDR is an effective agency in the future.

In closing, I want to thank our witnesses for appearing here today, as well as all the hard-working folks at ATSDR. Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back the rest of my time.