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Chairman, Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee  
Keynote Address for the  
International Society of Environmental Assessment  
2007 Panel on Exposure Characterization for Disaster Response  
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Thank you for inviting me to be with you today to join in your discussions on the public health consequences of disasters. I especially want to welcome Mitch Erickson, with the Science and Technology Directorate at the Department of Homeland Security.

When I came to Congress over 20 years ago, I never guessed that I would one day serve as chairman for the Appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over the Department of Homeland Security. My interests had initially taken me in the direction of housing and transportation issues (and getting the RTP EPA facility built!), but a reorganization of the Appropriations Committee several years ago put me in line for my current role. And I must say that it is both an interesting and challenging one.

Of course, the idea for such a Department was not even a glimmer in anyone's eye when I was first elected back in the mid-1980s, a time when the Cold War still largely defined the worldview of the country. Things have certainly changed over the last two decades, and particularly over the last six years.

While the Department of Homeland Security is a large, sprawling institution – the third largest in the executive branch – it does not encompass all aspects of the government's homeland security activities. For fiscal year 2007, for instance, the total federal homeland security budget was just over \$58 billion, with the Department of Homeland Security controlling only about half of that.

The rest was spread across other departments and agencies, with the Department of Defense and the Department of Health and Human Services playing the next largest roles. The Environmental Protection Agency, which took the lead environmental exposure role following the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11, got only about 0.2 percent of the overall homeland security budget. There are of course EPA funding streams not characterized as "homeland security" that are related to environmental exposure, but it is perhaps telling that the budget connection is not stronger.

I should probably say, "Be careful what you wish for!" There may well be opportunity costs in assigning additional funding streams more directly to homeland security missions and away from other lines of research. In fact, our Subcommittee's bill has ordered up an analysis of homeland security's place in research budgets across the federal government, considering the need to prioritize this area as well as the opportunity costs that might be incurred.

Our homeland security public health strategy is spread across four Federal entities: DHS is responsible for threat awareness and assessment, for developing and

monitoring detection equipment, and for funding the Metropolitan Medical Response System. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention maintains the nation's medical stockpile, and is responsible for the vast majority of grant dollars spent on preparing State and local public health systems for major events, such as pandemics and biological attacks. The Department of Health and Human Services decides what medications to develop and purchase, and also controls a hospital preparedness grant program. EPA tests environmental and health conditions and assists State and locals with cleanup following disasters.

Much of the focus of today's panel – mitigating environmental exposures during and following disasters – is not primarily under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security, although the Department is charged with the coordinating role in this area during and after disasters. The Office of Health Affairs at DHS, which was established earlier this year to play that role, is primarily focused on preparing for and responding to biological incidents. The Office also works with the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office on preparing for the consequences of nuclear events.

Disasters come in many forms: natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Floyd; accidental disasters, such as the EQ fire in Apex; and terrorist events, like the 9/11 attacks. DHS – and the executive branch as a whole – has focused predominantly on terrorist events, and has invested most heavily in preventing, preparing for, and responding to such events. And the primary focus has been on biological and nuclear events, because they are considered to be the most likely form of major terrorist attack, and with the greatest consequences for public health.

As far as I can tell, the broader category of environmental exposures has not received a great deal of attention. This is somewhat ironic, because the 9/11 attack, the major terrorist event experienced by our country, was neither biological nor nuclear, but did result in substantial environmental exposures for first responders and the public.

Last week, the White House released an updated National Strategy for Homeland Security document that seems to give more credence to the value of preparing for accidental and natural disasters, which are more likely to involve environmental exposures. The statement did include this curious statement, however: “Effective preparation for catastrophic natural disasters and man-made disasters, while not homeland security per se, can nevertheless increase the security of the homeland.” Does anybody care to deconstruct that logic?! In my view, homeland security directly involves any and every kind of risk to the population of the United States, and our investment priorities should be focused on mitigating the full panoply of risks faced by the country.

During a series of hearings earlier this year, my subcommittee focused a great deal of attention on the question of risk. As defined by the Department of Homeland Security, risk is the result of three factors: threat, vulnerability and consequences. Are individuals or natural forces likely to act against a geographic area, population, or item of critical infrastructure? If such action does occur, will it be successful carried out? And if the action is successful, what will be the short and long term impacts?

We are still very much in our infancy in terms of being able to robustly measure and quantify these factors, and to use those calculations to efficiently allocate scarce resources. We are not yet able to assess the extent to which our risk-based investment strategies are actually buying down risk. We are not certain that the range of risks we are dealing with are subject to a single metric; that is another area where our Subcommittee is asking the National Academy of Sciences to advise us. We are investing heavily in border and transportation security, first responder equipment, biological detection equipment, and a host of other materials and activities, but with limited confidence that we have the right mix of priorities.

Let me give you a specific example from the human health arena, something that the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Health Affairs is closely focused on. Many of you are probably familiar with the Biowatch program – not to be confused with the Department of Health and Human Services' Bioshield Program. Biowatch is a sensor-based early detection system for biological agents. The idea is to spread these sensors around populated areas to facilitate the earliest possible detection of a biological threat.

That sounds like a good idea, but how capable is the technology? How much does it cost? And what are the tradeoffs in terms of other things we could be investing in, such as upgrading existing public health and emergency room monitoring systems? North Carolina has made great strides in this area that likely could be replicated in other states with the right kind of support. What I have proposed, through the Fiscal Year 2008 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill, is to task the National Academies of Science to look very broadly at our capacity for risk assessment, and also to assess the value of a Biowatch-type system compared to other options.

I am no expert on what the Department of Health and Human Services and the Environmental Protection Agency are doing with respect to the public environmental exposures associated with disasters, but my strong sense is that those activities are probably insufficient, and that they are not coordinated with the investment strategies of DHS or state and local communities in the way they should be.

In fact, many New Yorkers are concerned that post-9/11 environmental monitoring has not been sufficient. And, all of us working in the Capitol get our mail irradiated, but our government is no closer to finding out who was responsible for the 2001 anthrax attacks. It certainly does not appear that we are sufficiently taking into account the kinds of health hazards that first responders and the public might face during and after disasters.

The Governmental Accountability Office at a hearing before my Subcommittee asked the question "What does it mean to be in charge, if not ensuring that actions that need to get done will get done? GAO found that no agency has come forward to accept responsibility for ensuring the soundness and execution of the government's overall response to a future biological attack.

This coordinating role falls in large measure to the Department of Homeland Security, and I will look forward to the findings of your conference as a guide to our Subcommittee's oversight. Thank you again for allowing me to join you, and I'd be happy to respond to questions you might have.