

**Opening Statement of Ranking Member Laura Richardson , as prepared**  
*Ensuring Effective Preparedness, Response, and Recovery for Events  
Impacting Health Security*

**March 17, 2010 at 2:00 PM**  
**311 Cannon House Office Building**

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Let me start by saying that our thoughts and prayers continue to be with our friends in Japan as they search for survivors and recover from one of the greatest disasters in the nation's history.

I supported the President's decision to expeditiously assist with relief efforts by deploying the U.S. military, FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue teams, and other assets to the region.

This disaster, which caused damage to areas in Hawaii and in my home state of California, demonstrates how one emergency can spiral into others.

The affects of the earthquake and subsequent tsunami has now prompted a public health emergency, including concerns regarding the radiation seeping from nuclear reactors.

It is truly a tragedy of historic proportions and one that we must learn from in order to prepare here at home.

As the representative of the 37<sup>th</sup> district of California, I understand the potential affects earthquakes and tsunamis could have on our cities and critical infrastructure. My district includes the Port of Long Beach, which aside from being among the busiest in the nation, is also among the most susceptible to these types of disasters due to its proximity to the Pacific Ocean and San Andreas Fault. So I am committed to ensuring we are doing all we can to be prepared for any and every type of emergency given the current situation in Japan.

Therefore, today's hearing can provide us with a better understanding of how well DHS is prepared to respond to the health effects of both natural and man-made disasters.

As you know, the previous Administration's reorganization efforts created the Office of Health Affairs.

Since its founding, there have been concerns about how well OHA fits within the Department's enterprise.

Dr. Garza, during your confirmation hearing, you stated that OHA "is a young entity and in many ways, a work in progress".

I believe OHA needs to distinguish itself through effective leadership within DHS and amongst its federal partners in order to progress.

In this tough economic climate, it's important that each homeland security investment is dedicated to programs that are effective, efficient, and not duplicative.

Unfortunately, there have been programs within OHA's responsibilities that have not met those standards.

The BioWatch program, which is vital to our preparedness efforts, has suffered from poor management of upgrades and developmental delays of Gen-3 technologies.

The program relies on public health laboratories that partner to host BioWatch activities. But recent budget requests have not dedicated any support to these important partners.

A more glaring demonstration of OHA's apparent "growing pains" is the inability to fully establish the National Biosurveillance Integration Center.

NBIC was intended by law to integrate bio-monitoring activities of executive branch departments, but the GAO has reported on the lack of full participation from federal partners.

The GAO found that NBIC relied on publicly available internet information. This is completely opposite to the vision Congress had for the program.

Serious consideration should be given to whether this program is viable, or whether NBIC resources should be invested elsewhere.

Finally, OHA's workforce protection efforts appear to mimic those designated for the DHS Office of Safety and Environmental Programs. We must do all we can to protect DHS staff to ensure they can protect the Nation, but duplicating efforts is ineffective.

Dr. Garza, I look forward to hearing your plans to address these concerns and ensure us that OHA's mission has not expanded so far beyond legislative intent to a point where it has begun to creep.

These concerns are critical given the numerous challenges we face and the lack of resources to other preparedness programs.