

Ranking Member Laura Richardson (D-CA) Opening Statement

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications and the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Infrastructure Protection, and Security Technologies

Joint Hearing: “First Responder Technologies: Ensuring a Prioritized Approach for Homeland Security Research and Development”

May 9, 2012

As the Ranking Member of the Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications subcommittee and as a Member of the Cybersecurity, Infrastructure Protection, and Security Technologies Committee, I have a keen interest in ensuring that the Science and Technology Directorate effectively meets the needs of first responders.

Although I look forward to hearing Dr. Griffin’s testimony on the Science and Technology Directorate’s efforts to better meet the needs of first responders, like others on this panel, I am disappointed that FEMA is not here to discuss its role in ensuring that our first responders have the equipment they need to respond to disasters safely and effectively.

FEMA awards billions of dollars in Department of Homeland Security Preparedness Grants. FEMA’s insights regarding technology currently available to first responders and the use of research and development to improve or create new technologies to meet challenges faced by first responders would have been an invaluable asset in our examination of this issue. Unfortunately, we will not have FEMA’s input today. Mr. Chairman, I suggest that we talk to FEMA about these issues.

In previous hearings, this Committee has joined with the Government Accountability Office and the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General to raise questions about S&T’s efforts to meet its responsibilities to the first responder community. Before 2009, the Directorate was criticized for failing to conduct adequate outreach to the first responder community. Before 2009, S&T lacked a strategic plan and therefore had not identified the needs of first responders. If a system to identify needs does not exist, assignment of priorities cannot be done in a meaningful way.

Last November, Undersecretary O’Toole appeared before the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity to discuss her efforts to reorganize S&T and put it on the right track. At that time, she informed us of her efforts to establish a First Responder Group to identify the priorities of the first responder community and to allocate its limited resources accordingly. I also asked her about improvements and mechanisms she had established to ensure that tax payer dollars are used effectively and about the effect that budget cuts would have on S&T’s first responder activities.

The Undersecretary candidly told this Committee that Congressional budget cuts would allow S&T to address only two or three of the eleven first responder priorities identified by the National Academy of Public Administration. It is unfortunate that, as S&T is working to become more responsive to the needs of first responders, Congress is significantly reducing its ability to do so by cutting its funding. Today, as the Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security marks-up the Department’s budget, I think it’s important to bear in mind how S&T’s budget affects its ability to get work done and to ensure that S&T has the infrastructure to invest the money we appropriate.

Although S&T has made progress since 2009, more must be done to fully carry out its R&D strategies and to fully develop evaluation metrics. Given the current fiscal climate, S&T must also do more to readapt existing technologies and develop dual use technologies to meet the needs of first responders.

I am also eager to hear from representatives of the first responder community about their technology needs, whether they feel that the Department effectively solicits and responds to their input, and current challenges in acquiring emergency preparedness capabilities.