

Statement of Ranking Member Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ)

Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency

Hearing: “Oversight of Federal Efforts to Address Electromagnetic Risks”

Tuesday, May 17, 2016

The Department of Homeland Security is tasked with the overall safety and security of the United States. Last week, the Department revealed a new mission statement: With honor and integrity, we will safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values.

One risk to the homeland, an EMP, or Electromagnetic Pulse, is a burst of electromagnetic radiation that results from suddenly fluctuating magnetic fields.

An EMP can be either man-made or natural and can damage high voltage transformers and possibly contribute to grid failure and electric power blackouts. EMPs are considered a high impact, low probability risk occurrence.

As DHS tries to prioritize its efforts across a wide spectrum of potential dangers to the Nation, it should take seriously all risks impacting the homeland, not only EMPs but also climate change impacts, solar storms, and a wide range of natural disasters.

Last month, the Government Accountability Office released a report reviewing the Department’s assessment and coordination efforts in the EMP space. According to GAO, DHS components, including NPPD, FEMA, and S&T conduct independent activities addressing EMPs including research and development, stakeholder coordination, and mitigation.

However, no specific component has been tasked with lead responsibility for coordinating activities within the Department or with federal and industry stakeholders. Further, the Department has not fully leveraged opportunities to collect key inputs often used in a risk assessment, such as threat, vulnerability, and consequences information.

Risk assessments are a beneficial means of incorporating methods or tools to reach a specific, identifiable conclusion. Specifically, with the use of a risk assessment, the Department can better characterize the risk of EMPs in its overall protective mission.

In 2007, this Committee passed the 9/11 Commission Act, which required the Department to produce the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review, a document produced every four years for the purpose of comprehensively examining the Department’s homeland security strategy and risk priorities.

Thus far, two QHSRs have been created. It is my view that the latest 2014 release showed improvements from the 2010 review, but the Department still needs improvement in the way it assesses its risks, such as EMPs.

In the coming weeks, I will introduce legislation that addresses the importance of risk assessments in the development of the QHSR, specifically the need for a detailed, documented method for gauging homeland security threats.

In order to determine roles and responsibilities within the Department as GAO suggests, DHS must first determine where EMPs fit in the overall protective strategy for the Department.