

Press Release

T&I Committee Leads Off with Water Resources and Environment Hearing

January 19, 2007

The first hearing of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure in the 110th Congress was held January 19, 2007 by the Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment.

Rep. James L. Oberstar (Minn.), the Committee's Chairman, offered congratulations to Subcommittee Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (Tex.).

“Chairwoman Johnson, through her many years of service, is prepared and ready for the challenges ahead in the 110th Congress. She, along with the other Members of the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee, will take up the critical work of rebuilding America’s aging water systems and infrastructure,” said Chairman Oberstar. “Chairwoman Johnson will lead this Subcommittee to develop a plan to direct our Federal resources where there is the greatest need, so that we can maintain and improve the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the nation’s water systems.”

Chairman Oberstar also submitted the following statement into the record:

"At this first meeting of the Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment for the 110th Congress, I welcome back my Committee colleagues who have previously served on this Committee, as well as our new Members. I especially welcome Congresswoman Johnson, whom I have always enjoyed working with on water resources issues and who has shown tremendous leadership on this Subcommittee, and our colleagues, Ranking Member Mica and Ranking Member Baker.

As we begin both a new year and a new Congress, we are focused on the future and what lies ahead. However, much of what we accomplish in the forthcoming months will be determined on how we struggle with old issues and find solutions to past problems.

In June 1969, the Cuyahoga River, in Cleveland, Ohio, famously caught fire due to its heavily-polluted waters. At this same time, Lake Erie was pronounced “dead” due to its lack of aquatic life and oxygen resources. Many of our nation’s waters suffered similar problems.

This year, we will celebrate the 35th anniversary of the Clean Water Act. This landmark environmental statute established a national commitment to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the country’s waters and has produced a remarkable improvement in water quality, even as our population has grown significantly. In 1972, only one-third of our nation’s waters met water quality goals. Today, two-thirds of those waters meet these goals.

Despite these victories, large challenges still loom. Today, one-third of the nation’s waters

remain impaired, and an overwhelming majority of Americans – 218 million – live within 10 miles of a polluted lake, river, stream, or coastal area. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) warns that without a renewed commitment to funding wastewater infrastructure, more waters may be placed at risk.

Today, one in four Americans lives within four miles of a Superfund site. The EPA Inspector General's office has shown that without better management of funds, our cleanup program faces even more difficulties and hurdles than it already faces.

Mercury has invaded our nation's waters through pollution and our food supply has been dealt the negative consequences. According to the EPA, about one in every six American women carries unsafe levels of mercury in her blood, putting more than half a million American newborns at risk each year. Many children of this generation will never experience a fishing trip where they can safely cook and eat their hard-earned catch.

Agricultural pollution continues to threaten rural communities. Farms that do not monitor their effects on the environment continue to wreak havoc on many towns' public water supply, public health and economic vitality. One pig produces 10 times the fecal waste of one human being, and one farm that houses 50,000 hogs will produce more waste than a city of half a million people. That's not a pretty fact. Unless we reexamine the nation's efforts to address nonpoint source pollution, our small towns that build the agricultural base for our country face challenges too big for their resources.

The Great Lakes, which is the largest body of freshwater on earth, have been attacked by invasive species carried across the ocean in the ballast water of ships. In 2003, the EPA announced that the "dead zone" in Lake Erie, which once showed improvements, was expanding once again. Zebra mussels clog large water infrastructure pipes throughout Lakes, and impair cities as large as Chicago. Asian carp threaten to enter the Lakes and have the potential to devastate the fisheries of Lakes Huron, Ontario, Superior, and Michigan.

Today's hearing focuses on our nation's aging water infrastructure that is in dire need of repair, replacement, and upgrading. Several recent studies have shown the need to increase investment not because of underinvestment in the past, but because infrastructure laid down over the years is approaching the end of its useful life. Sewer overflows plague many of our major cities, as they were built for a different time and for much smaller populations. We have yet to reduce the existing "gap" between our nation's water infrastructure needs and the funds we have available to repair systems and fund future projects.

Although much of our infrastructure is unnoticed and underappreciated by most Americans on a daily basis, this "out of sight, out of mind" attitude changes when problems arise. Polls have shown that, overwhelmingly, Americans believe clean, safe water is a priority issue that warrants Federal investment. This view is shared across age, gender, and party lines.

Every second hospital bed in the world is occupied by someone who became ill because of polluted water. In this nation, we pride ourselves on being leaders. We need to invest in our

infrastructure, providing for new projects and adequate maintenance. We need to lead by example."

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For more information, contact Mary Kerr at 202-226-4496.