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Before the

Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
And
Subcommittee on Energy and Environment
Committee on Science and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives

Regarding the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL)

August 1, 2007

Thank you, Chairman Miller and Chairman Lampson and Members of the Committees, for the opportunity to speak to you today about the Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Science's association with and support for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL). As you well know, the Office of Science supports fundamental basic research that underpins the Department's complex mission areas of energy, environment, and national security. All of the research the Office of Science funds at the laboratories and universities, including facilities construction and operations, are awarded through a peer reviewed merit-based process. This rigorous process is essential to maintaining the quality of our research programs.

SREL has historically received the majority of its funding from DOE, including the Office Science and its predecessors, the Office of Environmental Management, and the Savannah River Operations office. In Fiscal Years (FY) 2001 through 2005 the Department provided $7 to $8 million per year to SREL. The Department's Office of Environmental Management provided this funding through FY 2002. During the same period, SREL received additional funding from the University of Georgia and some external grants, the latter together totaling between $1.5 million and $3.5 million per year. This gave SREL a total budget of roughly $10 million per year during this period. It is important to note that the DOE funding provided nearly all of the infrastructure and administrative support for SREL, even though SREL was operated and managed by the University of Georgia.

With the FY 2003 budget, funding and responsibility for SREL was transferred from the Office of Environmental Management to the Office of Science and placed in the Office of Biological and Environmental Research, Environmental Remediation Sciences Division. This decision was part of an effort by the Department and the Administration to focus the DOE Office of Environmental Management program on clean-up and to centralize basic research efforts in the Office of Science. The Office of Science's Environmental Remediation Sciences Division funds

peer-reviewed scientific research focused on a major DOE mission challenge: understanding and controlling the mobility of subsurface contaminant plumes across the DOE complex. The behavior of these plumes, whose underground mobility poses a serious and long-term environmental challenge, is not adequately understood. The Environmental Remediation Sciences basic research program seeks to provide better understanding and control of subsurface contaminant plumes, a critical environmental problem. SREL's research program is focused on terrestrial ecology and radioecology as it pertains to the Savannah River Site and thus was not well aligned with the Environmental Remediation Sciences program's priority focus on *subsurface* contaminant mobility and plumes.

Prior to FY 2003, DOE funding for SREL was not determined on the basis of competitive peer-review. From FY 2003 through FY 2005, the Environmental Remediation Sciences Division worked closely with SREL in an effort to reorient the laboratory's research programs and to develop a peer reviewed program of research that was aligned with the Environmental Remediation Sciences mission-based program. This effort included a programmatic alignment review conducted by an external panel in the fall of 2003, a research project review of SREL's individual research programs conducted by Office of Science program managers in the summer of 2004, and a review by a Biological and Environmental Research Advisory Committee, Committee of Visitors in the fall of 2004. The reviews addressed how best to align the SREL's efforts with the Office of Science mission and provided recommendations to that end. The reviews were not asked to address whether SREL should or should not be funded, and results of the reviews were provided to SREL. During this time, FY 2003 through FY 2005, the Office of Science provided approximately $8 million per year to SREL.

The FY 2006 Budget Request for the Office of Science required some difficult budget decisions across all of our programs, including a reduction of approximately $10 million in the Environmental Remediation Sciences Division. The Environmental Remediation Sciences Division evaluated its research portfolio on the basis of DOE mission and scientific priorities in light of the reduction and decided to maintain the portfolio of scientifically peer-reviewed research focused on subsurface contaminants and plumes and to terminate support for research in surficial science, including terrestrial ecology and radioecology. While SREL had some expertise in the areas of subsurface contaminant processes, the bulk of its expertise was in the research areas that were terminated. The decision to focus the Environmental Remediation Sciences research portfolio more directly on DOE mission needs ended legacy funding for SREL. However, we encouraged SREL to submit proposals to the Environmental Remediation Sciences program that addressed the Program's priority research objectives.

In FY 2006, the Office of Science provided $1.0 million in cooperation with the Office of Environmental Management, which provided $3 million, and the National Nuclear Security Administration, which provided $300,000, in support of a transition of SREL's funding. The Office of Science has provided no additional funds since then. Budget language in FY 2006 encouraged SREL to compete for research funding within the Office of Biological and Environmental Research's overall research program. During fiscal years 2006 and 2007, SREL has submitted one proposal to the Environmental Remediation Sciences Division. That proposal, submitted in 2006, fared poorly in peer review and was not funded.

In summary, let me stress the respect that the Office of Science holds for the long history and important contributions, including education and community outreach, provided by the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory. We made the decision to terminate funding for surficial science, including radioecology and surficial fate and transport, only after carefully considering and weighing the fundamental science needs of the DOE complex and the potential benefits of continued support in these areas. It was our decision that the science associated with subsurface contaminant migration was the clear priority for DOE's long-term environmental remediation and legacy management needs. We continue to support that decision. We also continue to encourage SREL, as we have in recent years, to direct its research interests towards the Office of Science's mission-driven priority research areas and would be pleased to have SREL make additional efforts to compete for funding in this area.

Thank you again, Chairman Miller and Chairman Lampson, and I am happy to answer any questions you or Members of the Committee may have.