

Statement of John Barrow (GA-12)
To the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight, and
The Subcommittee on Energy and Environment
of the
House Committee on Science and Technology
July 17, 2007
10 a.m.
2318 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C.

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner;
Chairman Lampson, Ranking Member Inglis,
and Members of the Committee:

Thank for holding this hearing and thank you for inviting me to appear before you today.

I am extraordinarily concerned with recent actions by the Department of Energy that I understand have drastically reduced the adequate, stable, and mission-based funding for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory and have caused the Laboratory, for all practical purposes, to close.

Over the past 5 years, the Department's support for the Lab has been drastically reduced and manipulated, while the University of Georgia, which manages the Laboratory, has continued to uphold its end of the financial bargain that has kept the SREL going over the years.

It seems evident to me that the Department of Energy's policy of reducing funding for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL) is about to take from all of us a valuable research tool to protect our citizens and our environment. I am convinced that the need for sufficient and sustained Laboratory funding from the Department is crucial. The Department's drastic reduction in funding, and the processes they employed in reducing funding, have come under increased scrutiny recently, we must learn the truth.

I thank you and your staff for the timely and energetic investigation of the Department of Energy's current and past plans to reduce and eliminate funding for this laboratory. The more I learn about the situation involving the Department's SREL funding, the more I'm puzzled.

After first becoming aware of the dire funding situation at SREL, and in my initial contacts with Secretary Bodman and his staff, I suggested to the Secretary that we work together to develop and plan an expanded, ample, and stable DOE budget that would

support the laboratory's vital mission. The Department's response to me was vexing. I was told a story that didn't quite jive with the communications that I had received from the scientific community, local leaders, and others who were familiar with the situation.

Specifically, I was told by the Department in a letter from Secretary Bodman's staff, that the research being conducted at the facility was not 'peer reviewable'. When I checked on this I was assured by some of the top scientists in the country that the research at SREL was fully peer reviewable and that the quality of the research was top-rank. This is only one of the inconsistencies that been unearthed in the early stages of discovery.

The Savannah River Ecology Laboratory, founded by Dr. Eugene Odum, one of the most influential figures in the history of ecology in the 20th century, has been studying the effects of the Department's nuclear production and processing activities on the environment, wildlife creatures, and habitat at Savannah River Site (SRS) for over fifty-five years. Currently, the Laboratory supports cleanup missions as well as providing critical information related to long-term stewardship issues at the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site. This kind of research has enormous implications for the surrounding watershed, which includes a large part of the 12th District of Georgia, and quite frankly for nuclear production sites around the world.

SREL is an independent academic laboratory that provides significant credibility among the general public and regulators on issues related to environmental impacts of nuclear facility operations, as well as the overall health of Savannah River Site ecosystems. Through its partnership with the DOE, the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory has established a strong international reputation for conducting high quality ecological research. In fact, SREL is often cited as an institution whose expertise and research forms the basis of stakeholder support critical to the Department for conducting existing and future missions at the Savannah River Site.

The Laboratory is unique in its focus and mission, and the body of research that it has produced in over a half century of scientific exploration, is important not only for our country, but this body of work is recognized and utilized throughout the scientific world.

To this end I believe it is critical to have an independent and credible source of information on how activities at our nuclear production sites affect wildlife, habitats, and our ecosystems. In addition to its ongoing research activities at the Savannah River Site, SREL is the organization that has the expertise, institutional memory, and academic credibility to develop and implement long-term monitoring plans at SRS and potentially at other DOE production sites that will be accepted and trusted by the general public, regulators, and other stakeholders.

After this investigation is concluded, and the findings published I would like to offer a view for the future. I would like to draw the Committee's attention to the issue of the best utilization of the National Environmental Research Parks. There are seven of these parks located on DOE sites throughout the country. The first one was established in

1972 on the Savannah River Site itself. Called the Savannah River Park, the site contains the greatest diversity of plants and animals in the entire southeastern region and has every major ecosystem found within the southeastern U.S. within its borders.

DOE originally acquired large tracts of land around its national nuclear production sites for security. These sites have been protected from commercial development and public access has been controlled and limited to the purposes of public education and research. In 1997, there was a suggestion that DOE divest these properties and the scientific community argued passionately for their preservation because of their great value for research and education.

Over the past, almost forty years, these sites have become ecological sanctuaries and natural laboratories unmatched in their size and diversity. Whether we talk about sound management of land and water resources, important species of animals, or better understanding and mitigation of the impacts of human activities on the environment, we must have information that has been systematically collected over many decades. That is exactly the type of information we have at SREL, and potentially this kind of research could be duplicated at these other National Environmental Research Parks.

This unfortunate crisis at SREL has brought an opportunity for Congress to use these parks more effectively. Once we get to the bottom of this investigation, and we restore Savannah River Ecology Lab functioning, I would propose that we should have SREL-like labs throughout the country at these parks, and then offer this model for interested allies, for most nuclear production sites around the world. This would be a great tribute to Dr. Odum, and a fitting recognition of the work that has been carried out by the dedicated scientists and staff at SREL for the past 55 years. I wouldn't even know how to place a value on the body of research that has been produced at SREL, it certainly cannot be duplicated or replaced if this laboratory is shuttered.

Instead of jeopardizing the future of valuable scientific assets with arbitrary and malicious budget cutting, the Department should be working to secure the future of these unique and valuable national assets that Dr. Odum foresaw these many years ago.

Thanks again for letting me come before you today, and I'd be glad to answer any questions.