

OPENING STATEMENT
The Honorable Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI)
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

“The Department of Energy’s Support for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL), Part II”

August 1, 2007

Absent from a very long list of witnesses today is Dr. Raymond Orbach, the Under Secretary for Science in the Department of Energy (DOE). Dr. Orbach incidentally was the only witness DOE requested to have present. Perhaps more importantly, Dr. Orbach is the head of the Office of Science. DOE’s recent support for SREL (*pronounced “S – REL”*) has come from two offices, the Office of Environmental Management and the Office of Science. Charlie Anderson, the head of Environmental Management, is here at the Minority’s request. Because the Minority is only entitled to one witness, Dr. Orbach is conspicuously absent.

In his testimony, Dr. Paul Bertsch notes that the performance-based budgeting documentation justifying the FY 06 request for the Environmental Remediation Sciences Division in the Office of Science listed SREL studies as two of its seven major accomplishments for FY 04. Furthermore, while the office of Environmental Management argues that SREL does not fit well within its mission, the Office of Science admits that many of SREL’s projects would further its mission. Clearly, if DOE continues to support SREL, the Office of Science will play a role. The Majority’s attempt to conduct this hearing without either Dr. Orbach or Charlie Anderson present, evidences an intent, not to save SREL, but to paint DOE in a negative light.

Lost in the unnecessary politicization of this issue, is the laboratory itself. By all accounts, SREL has been a successful private research facility run by the University of Georgia. In her testimony, Karen Patterson pointed out the respect the local community has for SREL. I think we can all agree that the lab has made important scientific contributions and that its closure would be a loss for the Savannah River Site and the scientific community.

I do not, however, believe that SREL should be given free money. From its inception in 1951 until 2005, SREL received non-competitive funding. If Dr. Orbach had been invited to testify today, he could have explained how SREL received direct, non-competitive funding from the Office of Science for three years. This is not how our tax dollars should be spent. If DOE funds SREL, it should be done under a competitively-awarded contract.

I also object to suggestions that DOE’s behavior was, in some way, sinister. The Majority has suggested that DOE somehow negotiated with SREL in bad faith. The Committee’s investigation, however, has not uncovered any evidence of this. After SREL was zeroed out of the Office of Science’s budget, the Office Environmental Management negotiated with SREL to fund the lab at \$4.3 million for FY 2006 and \$1 million in FY 2007, plus additional funding on a task by task basis, based on “need, merit, and availability of funds.” DOE’s intention was to move SREL toward a more competitive funding model without instantly pulling all of the lab’s funding. Miscommunications of this agreement unfortunately lead to confusion amongst DOE employees at the Savannah River Site, but nonetheless, DOE has steadfastly honored its agreement.

I look forward to hearing from today’s witnesses. I hope we can work fairly and cooperatively to find ways to support SREL’s survival.