Union of Concerned Scientists
Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions

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Madame Chair and members of the Subcommittee, the Union of Concerned Scientists appreciates the opportunity to testify today.

In order for Congress to responsibly manage the taxpayer's money and to enact laws that keep our nation safe and healthy, Congress must have a source of credible and timely advice on science and technology. The best agency for the job is the Office of Technology Assessment.

From 1972 to 1995, the OTA helped Congress assess complex issues and make wiser legislative choices. OTA reports addressed issues before almost every Congressional committee. While the analysis produced by OTA did not always drive congressional decision making, it did set boundaries to debates, rule out some scientifically incorrect arguments, and help to frame political decisions in technically defensible ways.

The OTA model, honed over 23 years of serving the needs of Congress and the nation, was incredibly successful. What's more, the 1972 Technology Assessment Act is an incredibly flexible document, and any needed modernizations or improvements can be achieved within its scope.

We are currently engaging the best thinkers on OTA develop a common-sense proposal for re-starting OTA that takes into account our fiscal reality. We will submit to you a detailed Fiscal Year 2011 funding proposal within the next two weeks. Renewing OTA is a multi-year project, and we do not believe the taxpayers and American families should wait any longer.

I am here as much as a mother and a daughter as I am here as a scientist to tell you that OTA—while designed to serve the needs of Congress—in reality served the needs of our nation.

Members of Congress certainly do not lack for input, but in many situations they do lack credible and nonpartisan information that is structured in a way they can easily use. OTA was uniquely structured to provide credible information in the following areas:

- unnecessary expenditure of taxpayer money on unproven technologies or other policies that are scientifically indefensible;
- early identification and analysis of technological issues before they become national crises; and

- Evaluation of Executive Branch science and technology initiatives to aid Congress in its oversight duties.

OTA more than earned its keep by identifying wasteful and ineffective programs and suggesting improvements to others. The savings from just two OTA studies – one on Alzheimer's disease and one that exposed the flaws in a Social Security Administration computer system – would have paid for OTA for the last 15 years.

What's more, policies based on OTA studies saved lives and reduced the need for future medical interventions.

- A 1988 study pointed out the vulnerability of low birth weight infants to a variety of physical and mental disabilities. That study helped change Medicaid eligibility rules by expanding access to prenatal care to millions of women in poverty.

- A 1987 study predicted that Medicare coverage of mammograms for senior women could cut breast cancer deaths.[1] Likewise, a 1990 study concluded that older women undergoing routine pap smears were much less likely to develop cervical cancer than unscreened women.[2] Both of these reports were instrumental in expanding Medicare coverage to include routine mammograms and pap smears.

A number of OTA reports also proved to be years ahead of their time on many of the critical issues Congress is debating today – from weapons proliferation to genetic discrimination.

Finally, in recent years Congress has approved a number of expensive yet troubled programs that could have been identified and averted by a timely OTA assessment.

- The Department of Homeland Security spent three years pushing for a costly radiation detection system for smuggled nuclear material that did not work as promised, while neglecting to upgrade existing equipment that could have improved security. DHS had already awarded billions of dollars in contracts for deployment of the detectors before critical Government Accountability Office reports and congressional protests caused them to reconsider.[3]

The GAO, the National Academies, and the Congressional Research Service are all good at what they do, and they should continue to do it, but none of them can fill the OTA's shoes.

By refraining from value judgments and prescriptive recommendations, OTA was able to be both authoritative and credible. OTA studies were technically accurate, analytically sound, and balanced with respect to stakeholder interests. In its reports, OTA made no policy recommendations, but rather presented a range of policy options that were consistent with its technical findings. OTA also informally aided members and their staff in how to think about an issue, by inquiring into the foundations of claims made by a technology and paying close attention to its consequences.

The world has changed since the OTA was authorized 40 years ago, and undoubtedly the OTA that might open in 2011 would need to be modernized.

- A revitalized OTA in the 21st century would take full advantage of electronic communication to boost educational capacity of OTA, be more responsive to both parties, and establish strong working relationships with similar agencies such as NAS, CRS and GAO.

An OTA today could assess technologies designed to help protect our children from lead poisoning, evaluate technologies designed to help seniors and the disabled stay in their homes longer, and assist Congress to make accurate links among investments in various technologies and their potential to create jobs.

I bring with me today a letter signed by 41 diverse organizations supporting the revival of the OTA. Let's please start a dialogue that will lead to the restoration of this important agency.

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[1] U.S. Office of Technology Assessment. *Breast Cancer Screening for Medicare Beneficiaries*. November 1987.
[2] U.S. Office of Technology Assessment. *The Costs and Effectiveness of Screening for Cervical Cancer in Elderly Women*. OTA-BP-H-65. February 1990.
[3] O'Harrow, R. 2009. Report criticizes nuclear detectors. *Washington Post*, June 23.