

Senate Committee Holds Hearing on Proposed Helium Legislation

On May 7, 2013, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources held a hearing to discuss the proposed Helium Stewardship Act of 2013 (S. 783) which was introduced on April 23, 2013 by Chairman Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Ranking Member Lisa Murkowski (R-AK).

During the hearing, Wyden, Murkowski, and the witnesses emphasized the urgent need to address the impending early closure of the Federal Helium Reserve in October 2013, which would cut off 42 percent of the domestic and 35 percent of the global helium supply.

S. 783 allows the reserve to continue current operations through September 30, 2014, then begins auctioning off 10 percent of the helium available for sale each year, and eventually provides helium solely to federal users. Tim Spisak of the Bureau of Land Management stated that the Department of the Interior supports S.783.

If the bill passes the Senate, the Senate and House will need to reconcile differences between S.783 and the recently passed House version of the helium legislation (H.R. 527). The major difference between the bills is in the auction set-up: S.783 proposes a phased implementation process for auctioning an increasing amount of helium per year while H.R. 527 proposes conducting all sales through biannual auctions. Walter Nelson, of Air Products and Chemicals, Inc., testified that the “wisdom” of a phased auction “contrasts” with the “uncertainty” for contracts that the House bill would create.
