

House holds hearing on maintaining U.S. leadership in science and technology

March 6, 2019

Continuing its mission to facilitate scientific research and development, the House Science, Space and Technology Committee held a hearing on maintaining U.S. leadership in science and technology (S&T) on March 6. The hearing heard from a small panel of witnesses, including Dr. Marcia McNutt, president of the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Patrick Gallagher, chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh, and Dr. Mehmood Khan, vice chairman and chief scientific officer at PepsiCo.

Committee Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson began the hearing by detailing the importance of looking ahead to the future of science policy and how it can help shape the scope of future U.S. scientific endeavors. Johnson noted that, according to the National Science Foundation (NSF), the U.S. now ranks 11th in the world in research intensity. Pointing out the need to bolster U.S. competitiveness in S&T, Johnson highlighted the diversification of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce as an important step in achieving this goal.

Marcia McNutt echoed Chairwoman Johnson's call to assess the efficacy of current science policy and urged the committee to use their authority to ensure that policy and oversight relating to science help to maintain the Nation's leading role in S&T. McNutt advised against timidity in advancing S&T because "other nations are not hesitating to debate many of the issues we face. They are examining every metric of competitiveness, and looking years ahead to make large investments in their own expanding research enterprise." One such nation mentioned frequently throughout the hearing was China, which has expanded its S&T activities enormously in recent decades and competes directly with the U.S. for S&T leadership.

Patrick Gallagher's testimony further warned that the U.S. risks losing its global strength and reputation in S&T without bolder action in science policy. Gallagher detailed how many competing industrialized nations have clear aspirations to grow their domestic S&T competency to rival that of the U.S., and suggested that adjusting federal S&T funding support to reflect the current state of national needs could be the most effective way to boost domestic S&T. The timing of this testimony sets up a stark contrast between Gallagher's position and the White House budget plan for fiscal year 2020, released on March 11, which called for decreased funding for several scientific agencies, including a 13 percent cut to the National Science Foundation.

Mehmood Khan assured the committee that, despite growing competition from China, the U.S. remains the world's epicenter for scientific and technological innovation. He also cautioned, however, that this position could rapidly change if the U.S. does not facilitate new scientific developments on a scale that is at least comparable to those of other countries. Khan emphasized the importance of considering the benefits of S&T development across different sectors—including the private, public, and education sectors—when thinking about how to maintain the Nation's leadership position.

Sources: Library of Congress; The National Science Foundation; The Washington Post; The White House; U.S. House, Committee on Science, Space and Technology.
