Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

"Nuclear Terrorism: Strengthening Our Domestic Defenses, Part II"

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
September 15, 2010

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this second hearing on the efforts of the Department of Homeland Security to prevent nuclear terrorism against our country. At our first hearing, we examined the Department's inexplicable failure to complete a much-needed strategy to address this growing threat.

We know that time is not on our side.

The 2008 report by the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction predicted that "it is more likely than not that a weapon of mass destruction will be used in a terrorist attack somewhere in the world by the end of 2013." There is no more alarming prospect than that of a nuclear 9/11.

A nuclear bomb is the ultimate terrorist weapon, causing an unimaginable amount of death, suffering, and horror – precisely the kind of frightening and inhumane outcome that terrorists seek.

Terrorists have made clear their desire to secure a nuclear weapon. Given this stark reality, we must ask: what has the Department done to defend against nuclear terrorism on American soil? The answer, unfortunately, is not enough . . . not nearly enough.

Today, the Department still lacks a strategic plan for the global nuclear detection architecture, a necessity first identified by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) nearly eight years ago. We cannot wait another eight years or even another eight months. The Department must complete this plan now.

The office charged with this effort at DHS – the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (DNDO) – has seemed more intent on investing in new technology than on the nuts-and-bolts planning that should guide these acquisitions. The Office has spent more than 224 million dollars over nearly

five years on the Advanced Spectroscopic Portal (ASP) program, with the goal of developing the next-generation primary cargo scanning technology to detect unshielded nuclear and radiological materials.

But in February 2010, DNDO announced that ASP was no longer being pursued as a possible primary scanning technology, and was now only being looked at as a possible secondary scanning technology. Unfortunately, GAO has found that the technology is only slightly better than existing monitors.

GAO's statement for the record today highlights problems with another scanning technology that would x-ray the contents of cargo containers. GAO found that DNDO failed to adequately communicate with Customs and Border Protection about such basic issues as how large the equipment could be to still fit within port of entry inspection lanes. After more than two years of work, DNDO decided to cancel the acquisition of this technology and focus on more research and development.

DHS must be a more responsible steward of taxpayer dollars. Time and money have been wasted as DNDO focused almost completely on marginal improvements in technology, rather than identifying gaps in coverage and the appropriate technology to eliminate those gaps.

Moreover, troubling gaps continue to exist that could be exploited by terrorists seeking to smuggle illicit nuclear materials into the United States.

To be sure, the Department has deployed more than 1,400 radiation portal monitors, allowing nearly 100 percent of cargo entering seaports and nearly 100 percent of vehicle traffic on the southern and northern borders to be scanned for unshielded nuclear material. And that is significant.

But, cargo coming into this country by rail from Canada or Mexico is still not scanned, and only a small percentage of international air cargo is scanned.

Effective scanning technology for these shipments would form an important part of a layered, risk-based defense to nuclear terrorism.

The lack of a strong strategic plan to establish priorities and to give our tactics cohesion has contributed to our slow progress on an effective defense against terrorists' nuclear ambitions.

This strategy should include a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis that accounts for currently available and potential future technologies, as

well as the personnel, intelligence, and infrastructure needed to combat the terrorist nuclear threat.

In addition, to improve the coordination across government, President Obama must appoint a Coordinator for the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism as required by the 2007 homeland security law. This Coordinator would help promote the interagency collaboration needed to develop and implement an effective strategy to defend against this threat.

Inadequate planning causes schedule delays and cost overruns and the procurement of the wrong kinds of technology. When we're talking about preventing nuclear terrorism, these failures can lead to catastrophic consequences for our nation.

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