Opening Statement
The Honorable Madeleine Z. Bordallo
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
Tuesday, June 9, 2009

Oversight Hearing on "Overdose: How Drugs and Chemicals in Water Supplies and the Environment are Harming our Fish and Wildlife."

The benefits of the drugs and chemicals available to us today are numerous. Drugs keep us healthy, pesticides protect our crops, and common household products make our lives easier. The intent of these drugs and chemicals is to improve our standard of living, but after we use them, their disposal is not always well controlled and they can enter the environment where they have unintended and harmful consequences for fish and wildlife.

These contaminants are generally disposed of through wastewater, but the vast majority of local sewage treatment plants do not have the technology or the means to filter them out. As a result, the contaminants are discharged when the wastewater plants discharge their treated water into local rivers, lakes and the ocean. Other contaminants are contained in agricultural run-off, flowing directly into the environment without any treatment.

Some of these contaminants disrupt and negatively impact the development, growth, metabolism, and reproduction of fish and wildlife and may be considered endocrine disrupting compounds or EDCs. The presence and impacts of EDCs is not a new phenomenon. From about 1940 to 1970, a drug was prescribed to pregnant woman to prevent miscarriages, but resulted in increased rates of cancer in their daughters. One pesticide, DDT, impacted reproduction in wildlife, leading to its ban in 1972. These studies and others show that connections between EDCs and environmental and human health have been acknowledged for decades.

However, there are several reasons for increased concern now about the affects of EDCs on fish and wildlife.

First, current research demonstrates how widespread these contaminants are throughout the environment. In a major study, the United States Geological Survey found one or more of 95 different chemicals in 80 percent of surveyed streams. More recently, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration through their "Mussel Watch" program, found a flame retardant in 300 sites along the entire U.S. coastline.

Second, the link between EDCs and their impact on fish and wildlife is now better understood. For example, USGS found intersex smallmouth bass, which are male fish with immature female eggs, in our backyard river, the Potomac. An additional study conducted by the USGS for which the results were released last week suggests that estrogen may also suppress immunity in fish.

Third, even chemicals which have been banned from use are still found in the environment in troubling concentrations and may accumulate up the food chain and be passed down to the next generations of fish and wildlife. Finally, there are numerous "contaminants of emerging concern", which may cause harm to fish and wildlife.

The good news, however, is that technologies to test the impacts of these contaminants and to monitor their presence in the environment have become more sophisticated. Additionally, voluntary approaches for reducing drugs and other chemicals in the environment are emerging at state and local levels.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. Some have been advancing the science on this issue for many years and others are demonstrating that we can take action now to reduce drugs and chemicals in the environment for the protection of our fish and wildlife populations.