Statement of Senator George V. Voinovich
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Hearing on "A Review of U.S. International Efforts to Secure Radiological Materials"
March 13, 2007

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding today's hearing. I would also like to welcome and thank our witnesses for being here today. This hearing will examine an issue of crucial importance to homeland security: our international efforts to secure high-risk radiological materials. Efforts to secure dangerous materials abroad are considered the first line of defense and are a critical element of our layered homeland security strategy.

Since 2002, over $143 million has been appropriated for the Department of Energy's (DOE's) International Radiological Threat Reduction Program to help other countries, including the former Soviet Union states, Indonesia, Iraq, and Mexico, secure dangerous radiological sources.

Today we are holding this hearing to ensure that the DOE and the other key responsible agencies, including the State Department and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), are adequately performing their roles.

In a tight federal budget, with demands for homeland security funding that far exceed the capacity of this nation to furnish it, it is discouraging to learn that coordination, both within the DOE and with the other key agencies, is lacking. Also, it is frustrating to learn that DOE has consistently carried over large balance of unspent and unobligated funds, while NRC's biggest challenge has been identifying adequate and reliable funding support from other agencies.

In a report being released at today's hearing, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that DOE did not transfer $5 million from its fiscal year 2004 appropriation to NRC for strengthening international regulatory controls over radiological sources, despite a Senate Appropriations Committee report directing DOE to do so.

In addition, gaps in information sharing between DOE and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have impeded DOE's ability to target the most vulnerable sites in IAEA member states for security improvements.

One of the chief concerns identified by the GAO is that many dangerous radiological sources remain unsecured worldwide, and that DOE may have focused limited program funding and resources on securing lower risk, lower priority facilities. Additionally, DOE has not given sufficient attention to developing long-term sustainability plans to protect investments in security upgrades. Without such plans, investments to improve the security of radiological sources in many countries may be ineffective.

We have been fortunate that no dirty bombs have been detonated by terrorists to date. However, confirmed reports of illicit trafficking in radiological materials have increased in recent years, and concerns have been raised regarding the potential for illicit use of unsecured radiological materials.

My colleagues know that I have been a consistent advocate for managing risk and setting priorities in our homeland security policy. I have often warned that we cannot secure everything, and we would bankrupt our country if we tried. However, I believe the scenario of terrorist use of a dirty bomb has a sufficiently grave combination of threat, vulnerability, and consequences to justify a serious focus on this issue.

A radiological dirty bomb could result in fatalities and serious health consequences, as well as significant economic, psychological and social disruption associated with the evacuation and subsequent cleanup of the contaminated area. The consequences resulting from a dirty bomb would be no less than that of an anthrax attack five years ago that took five lives nationwide, required the testing of thousands of mailroom employees throughout the Washington D.C. region, and shuttered buildings around the city for months. I remember vividly the uncertainty as my staff and I were forced to leave our office in the Hart buildings for four months while it was decontaminated.

Concerns about federal agencies having to do a better job of prioritizing and coordinating with each other in securing domestic radiological materials arose soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That's why Senator Carper and I, as Chairman and Ranking Member of the Clean Air, Climate Change, and Nuclear Safety Subcommittee, sponsored the nuclear security provisions in the Energy Policy Act of 2005. Among other things, these provisions required NRC to: (1) establish a nationwide mandatory tracking system for the high-risk radioactive sources; (2) establish additional controls on the import and export of radioactive sources including background check requirements for individuals involved in import or export shipments; and (3) establish a new inter-agency Task Force on Radiation Source Protection and Security.

Mr. Chairman, perhaps we need to consider expanding some of these provisions, where appropriate, to help the responsible agencies do a better job in securing dangerous radiological materials both domestically and abroad. I am also intrigued by the GAO's recommendation to provide NRC with authority and a direct appropriation to assist foreign regulators in developing regulatory infrastructure in lieu of providing the funds to DOE.

I do understand that the international dimension of this program has added significant challenges. But, clearly, we cannot and should not do this alone. I would like to better understand the difficulties each agency is having in dealing with your international counterparts including the IAEA, both in funding and programmatic cooperation.

Again, thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing and I look forward to the witnesses' testimonies on this critical topic.