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Opening Statement of
The Honorable Doc Hastings
Chairman, House Committee on Natural Resources
at the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, & Public Lands
Legislative Hearing on 8 bills, including
H.R. 5987, to establish the Manhattan Project National Historical Park in Oak Ridge, TN, Los Alamos, NM, and Hanford, WA, and for other purposes.
Thursday, June 28, 2012

Today's hearing on this proposed legislation has taken many years and the efforts of a great many dedicated individuals in several communities across the country that were integral to the successful development of the Manhattan Project. It is appropriate that we have witnesses representing each of the three communities that would become sites of this Historical Park, so that they may provide this Committee and the Congress with their unique perspective on how best to preserve and share the story of the Manhattan Project and the tremendous contributions and achievements of thousands of Americans who made it a success.

In 2003, I introduced legislation directing the National Park Service to study preservation options for Manhattan Project sites. This legislation was signed into law the following year – enabling the Park Service to begin their work. The National Park Service ultimately recommended a Park Unit comprised of facilities at Hanford, Washington, Los Alamos, New Mexico and Oak Ridge, Tennessee to best tell the story of the Manhattan Project, and preserve and protect these national resources and pieces of our nation's history.

Work on preservation efforts, though, started well before 2003. We are at this point today largely because of the continued hard work and dedication of key leaders in each of these local communities.

I represent the Tri-Cities where Hanford is located. I can literally see the Hanford site from my backyard, so much of my statement focuses on B Reactor and the other Hanford facilities in this legislation.

The historical significance of Hanford's B Reactor's has long been recognized by those in the surrounding Tri-Cities community. With local support, B Reactor was declared a Civil Engineering Landmark in 1968 and it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1992. In 2008, it was designated as a National Historic Landmark.

The community has worked hard over the years to protect B Reactor, and to prevent its demolition. In fact, at the end of the Cold War, when B Reactor faced the possibility of closure, the B Reactor Museum Association was formed to preserve the history of the reactor. Local groups such as the Tri-City Industrial Development Council, the Tri-Cities Visitor & Convention

Bureau, Hanford Communities, and others lent their support and persuaded leaders across Washington state to support B Reactor preservation.

To provide a little background to the Committee, Hanford's nuclear history began in the 1940's and played a pivotal role in our nation's defense for more than 40 years. As part of the Manhattan Project, the secret World War II effort to develop and construct the first atomic bomb, the work done at Hanford was an integral part of ending the War. Later, nuclear weapons production at Hanford helped provide the nuclear deterrence to win the Cold War and end to the Soviet Union.

The B Reactor, specifically, was a key part of Hanford's nuclear production success. Only months after Enrico Fermi first demonstrated that a controlled nuclear reaction was possible, ground was broken on the B Reactor – which, amazingly, only 13 months later, became the world's first full-scale plutonium production reactor. As part of the Manhattan Project, the B Reactor produced the plutonium for the first-ever nuclear explosion and later produced the plutonium for the bomb that helped end World War II.

Today, Hanford is a Department of Energy cleanup site. Under legally binding cleanup plans, Hanford's historic B Reactor would be destroyed at a cost to taxpayers of tens of millions of dollars. In the case of B Reactor, protecting and preserving history is expected to save money, while at the same time increasing public access.

I've had the opportunity to tour B Reactor numerous times and it truly is like stepping back into the 1940's. For those who didn't live through World War II, B Reactor tells the story of the time and of the workforce that contributed to our nation's defense for so many years, serving as an irreplaceable teaching tool for future generations.

The B Reactor tours currently offered by the Department of Energy routinely fill up within minutes. Credit is due to the local DOE leadership who've worked each year to increase access each and every year. Thousands now visit on an annual basis, from every state and from countries far away.

I'm especially pleased that in April the Department of Energy, for the first time, allowed schoolchildren under the age of 18 the opportunity to tour B Reactor. It's encouraging that over 500 children have toured the facility since then, demonstrating a real interest in a hands-on history experience. Again, credit for this achievement is due to the Richland Operations Office for making this happen and I commend their ongoing work on this initiative.

Today, many will correctly point out that each of the three locations included in this legislation have distinct facilities and unique logistical considerations. Some historic Manhattan Project facilities like B Reactor are very accessible today, others could be made readily accessible, while others will take time and care, and possibly a few more years, before regular public access is possible. However, the goal of this bill is to preserve these pieces of history from destruction and to facilitate and enhance public access. Clearly, the nature and location of these facilities, especially those located on secured Department of Energy sites, presents a challenge and this legislation aims to address this by ensuring maximum flexibility as steps are taken now and in the future to allow more public access.

As we consider this legislation today, it's important to note that similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate. Over the past several months, efforts have been undertaken to bridge differences in initial draft bills by myself and Chairman Bingaman. Very real progress was made and consensus reached on the approach of the bills. While some differences remain between the House and Senate bills, there is genuine bipartisan desire in both the House and Senate to advance this proposal into law – and to do everything we can to make that happen this year.

I look forward to continuing to work with Chairman Bingaman, Senators Murray and Cantwell from Washington state and my fellow House sponsors of this legislation, Congressman Fleischmann representing Oak Ridge, and Congressman Lujan representing Los Alamos to establish the Park. We will all continue working together with local community advocates and leaders to accomplish our goal of ensuring these remarkable pieces of our history are preserved to tell the story of the Manhattan Project.

Finally, I would like to extend a special welcome to those who have traveled here today from Hanford, Oak Ridge and Los Alamos to either appear as witnesses or join us in the audience. Thank you for coming and thank you for all your hard work and dedication.