

Statement of Chairman Frank Pallone
Energy & Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Health Hearing
“HHS Actions to Identify and Address Health Effects of the BP Oil Spill”
June 16, 2010

“Today, we will hear from the Department of Health Human Services about the critical actions it is taking to identify and address health effects related to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

“The tragedy that occurred on April 20 has been devastating for the people living in the coastal states, and has captured the concern and sympathy of everyone across the nation. Eleven people were killed and 15 more injured from the initial explosion. And this is just the beginning.

“There is no question that we have human health concerns associated with both short-term and long-term exposure to oil. Health experts have warned of health complications such as severe skin irritation, nausea, fatigue, headaches, throat and eye irritation, not to mention the significant depression and anxiety which often accompany these crises. Studies of people exposed to the Prestige oil spill off the coast of in Spain in 2002, showed that they suffered from respiratory complications several years after exposure. Breathing in volatile organic compounds, including benzene, can cause acute toxicity and could potentially result in serious long-term health effects like cancer, neurological and reproductive harm. We must also ensure rigorous monitoring of dispersants being used to be sure that they are having no adverse effects on human health for those workers and volunteers on the front lines of the clean up.

“Under the direction of the national incident commander, Admiral Thad Allen, and in coordination with the other key federal, state and local agencies, HHS has worked swiftly to identify and disseminate resources on the ground level. Today, we will hear about the work they are doing on health surveillance, worker trainer, food safety and epidemiological studies from the Assistance Secretary for Preparedness and Response, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Food and Drug Administration, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. This discussion should give us a stronger sense of the challenges these agencies are facing, the success they have had so far, and how we can expect HHS to further engage as new information becomes available.

“This crisis requires all hands on deck, and swift information sharing to protect the workers and the community members living near the coastal waters. I should add that no member of our full committee of Energy & Commerce has been more committed to this effort than the gentlemen from LA, Mr. Melancon, and we have appreciated him keeping us informed of the local perspective.

“Finally, I want to note that I am pleased that Secretary Sebelius has contracted a public meeting with the Institute of Medicine in New Orleans next week to convene an independent panel of scientific experts on human health exposure. The information we will glean from that meeting will undoubtedly provide even more expertise to help better execute the recovery effort.”