

**Statement of  
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**Before the  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Natural Resources**

**Oversight Hearing on  
The Past, Present, and Future of the Federal Helium Program  
&  
Legislative Hearing on  
H.R. 527, Responsible Helium Administration and Stewardship Act**

**February 14, 2013**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Federal helium program and H.R. 527, the Responsible Helium Administration and Stewardship Act, which would make various changes to the Helium Privatization Act of 1996, including establishing a phased approach to drawing down the Federal Helium Reserve. Because the bill was introduced just one week ago, the Department of the Interior has not had time to conduct an in-depth analysis, but we appreciate the opportunity to outline our general views at this time. As indicated by a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report published in early 2010, the market for helium has proven more volatile than expected over the last 15 years and the current law's requirement that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) offer for sale nearly all of the Reserve by 2015 could pose a threat to the availability of this resource for future U.S. scientific, technical, biomedical, and national security users of helium. The Department supports the goals of H.R. 527 and welcomes the opportunity to improve the management of this valuable commodity.

**Background**

Helium is a critical, non-renewable natural resource that plays an important role in medical imaging, space exploration, military reconnaissance, fiber optics manufacturing, welding and commercial diving. According to the NAS, helium's best known property, being lighter than air, means "that every unit of helium that is produced and used today will eventually escape the Earth's atmosphere and become one less unit available for use tomorrow."

The most common and economical way of capturing helium is by stripping it from natural gas during gas production. Geologic conditions in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas make the natural gas in these areas some of the most helium-rich in the United States, ranging from 0.5 to 1.5 percent of the gas extracted during production. The BLM plays a key role in the careful management and stewardship of the only significant long-term storage facility for crude helium

in the world, known as the Federal Helium Reserve (Reserve), which supplies approximately 42 percent of domestic demand and approximately 35 percent of global demand for crude helium.

### **The Federal Helium Program**

Because of helium's potential to lift military reconnaissance devices high above battlefields, the Federal government's interest in the resource dates back to World War I. Recognizing this key military use for helium, the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920 reserved to the Federal government all helium produced on Federal lands—a reservation that remains in effect today. After World War I, recognition of the potential for helium recovery in the Texas Panhandle, Western Oklahoma, and Kansas area (collectively, the "Hugoton" field) led to the development of the Federal helium program focused in that area. In 1929, the Bureau of Mines built the Amarillo Helium Plant and Cliffside Gasfield Facility near Amarillo, Texas, to produce helium-bearing natural gas from a naturally occurring geologic field known as the Bush Dome Reservoir.

After World War II, Federal use of helium shifted toward applications related to space exploration, and in 1960 Congress passed the Helium Amendment Act. This Act changed the program's mandate from exclusive government production of helium to conservation of the resource by executing contracts with private natural gas producers to purchase extracted crude helium for the Federal government to store in the Bush Dome Reservoir. The Act granted the Bureau of Mines the authority to borrow funds from the U.S. Treasury to purchase the helium, with the expectation that the proceeds from future sales of helium would allow the BLM's predecessor agency in this area, the Bureau of Mines, to repay the debt. This borrowing authority, established by Congress in lieu of a direct appropriation, required the Bureau of Mines to repay the loan by 1985. Subsequent legislation extended the deadline to 1995.

Federal demands for helium rarely, if ever, met the expectations underlying the terms of the Treasury's loan to the Bureau of Mines. When the 1995 deadline to pay off the debt arrived, the \$252 million the Bureau had spent on privately-produced helium had increased to \$1.3 billion (principal and interest), and the Bureau of Mines appeared to have little prospect of ever repaying the debt. In his 1995 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton stated that it was his Administration's goal to privatize the Federal helium program.

Congress subsequently passed the Helium Privatization Act of 1996 (HPA), which required the BLM (which assumed jurisdiction over the program after the termination of the Bureau of Mines) to make available for sale the vast majority of the stockpile of crude helium. The mandate directed the BLM to begin selling helium no later than 2005, in order to avoid market disruption. The BLM was to make a consistent amount of helium available every year at a price based on the amount of remaining helium debt and the amount of helium in storage. When Congress passed the HPA, there was approximately 30.5 billion standard cubic feet (scf) of helium in storage in the Bush Dome Reservoir. The HPA mandated the BLM to make available for sale all of the helium in excess of a 600 million scf permanent reserve.

Additionally, the HPA required the BLM to cease all helium production, refining, and marketing activities to effectively privatize the refined helium market in the United States. Finally, the Act

provided for the NAS to review the impacts of the 1996 Act. The NAS published its first study in 2000, and released a follow-up report in 2010.

### **The BLM's Helium Operations**

The BLM currently operates the Federal helium program with a primary goal of paying off the "helium debt." To this end, the BLM has paid approximately \$1.33 billion to the U.S. Treasury since 1995. This constitutes substantial progress toward eliminating the helium debt, which the HPA froze at approximately \$1.37 billion. During FY 2012, \$180 million was paid toward the helium debt from Reserve sales, resulting in an outstanding balance of approximately \$44 million at the end of the fiscal year.

According to the HPA, once the helium debt is retired, the Helium Production Fund (used to fund the BLM's helium program operational expenses) would be dissolved and all future receipts would be deposited directly into the general fund of the U.S. Treasury. The BLM expects to generate enough revenue during this fiscal quarter through currently authorized helium sales to pay off the debt at the beginning of FY 2014.

The BLM's current helium program, with a workforce of 51 full-time equivalents (FTE), operates not only the original storage and pipeline system, but also a crude helium enrichment unit, owned by private industry refiners, that facilitates transmission of helium to private helium operations on the BLM's helium pipeline. The BLM is responsible for administering helium extracted from Federal resources, including management of fees and royalty contracts. These operations are not limited to the Hugoton gas field, but also occur in fields in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and any other state where producers extract helium from the Federal mineral estate. Additionally, the BLM is responsible for administering the sell-off of crude helium to private refiners. These sales make the most significant contributions toward paying off the helium debt. The agency also conducts domestic and, to a lesser extent, international helium resource evaluation and reserve tracking to determine the extent of available helium resources.

Another major part of the BLM's helium program is the "In-Kind" program, which supplies helium to Federal agencies (e.g., the Department of Energy and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) for operations and/or research. Before the Helium Privatization Act, Congress required Federal agencies to purchase their helium supplies from the Bureau of Mines. Under the current In-Kind program, Federal agencies purchase all of their refined helium from private suppliers who, in turn, are required to purchase an equivalent amount of crude helium from the Reserve. In FY 2012, Federal agencies purchased \$10.3 million of helium through the In-Kind program.

### **The National Academy of Sciences Reports**

In 2000, the NAS published its first analysis of the impacts of the HPA. Its general finding was that the Act would not have an impact on helium users. Additionally, the NAS report concluded that because the price-setting mechanism was based on the amount of the helium debt, and not the market for helium, the government's significantly higher price would mean the helium refining industry would buy crude helium from the BLM only as a last resort for fulfilling private

contracts. However, private helium refiners would still be required to purchase crude helium from the BLM under the In-Kind program.

Over the course of the last decade, however, it has become apparent that assumptions underlying the 2000 NAS Report did not hold. First, the NAS's assumption that "[t]he price of helium [would] probably remain stable through at least 2010" has proven faulty. The market for helium has seen significant fluctuations on both the demand side—which dropped significantly in 2008 after peaking the prior year—and on the supply side, which experienced a significant decline in private supplies between 2006 and 2008. In the face of this volatility, prices for helium rose steadily over the course of the decade. By 2008, the market price for helium began to hover near the BLM's price, leading to greater withdrawals from the Reserve than the 2000 NAS Report anticipated.

Another market impact that the 2000 NAS Report did not address was international supply and demand for helium. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, domestic consumption of helium decreased 2.7 percent per year from 2000-2007, while exports to the Pacific Rim grew 6.8 percent annually, exceeding the 5.1 percent growth rate in Europe. The international market also experienced supply issues because of refining capacity problems at plants in Qatar and Algeria, which would normally help supply both Europe and Asia.

In early 2010, the NAS released a follow-up report on the BLM's management of the Reserve. The report, entitled "Selling the Nation's Helium Reserve," focused on "whether the interests of the United States have been well served by the [HPA] and, in particular, whether selling off the Reserve has had any adverse effect on U.S. scientific, technical, biomedical, and national security users of helium."

The 2010 NAS report, which identified some shortcomings of the 2000 report, takes a markedly different tone than the 2000 report. This change in approach reflects the volatility of the helium market over the last decade. The NAS report analyzes the relationship between supply and demand for helium on a domestic and international basis, as well as the BLM's management of the Reserve under the HPA. The report concludes that the HPA mandated sell-off is negatively impacting the needs of both current and future users of helium in the United States. This conclusion is the driving force behind a series of recommendations in the report directed at the BLM and the United States Congress.

### **H.R. 527, Responsible Helium Administration and Stewardship Act**

H.R. 527 addresses many of the concerns that the 2010 NAS report identified regarding the Federal government's involvement in the helium market. Most importantly, the bill would create a set of phased authorities for the BLM's management of the Reserve, establishing a "glide path" from the sales mandated under the HPA to a scenario where 3 billion scf of helium would be reserved solely for Federal users. This would accomplish the original goals of the HPA—the exit of the Federal government from the broader helium market and the paying off of the helium debt—while protecting long-term supply interests for the Federal government. The Department generally supports this approach to gradually scale back the Federal helium program.

The bill stipulates three phases to the drawdown: “Phase A: Finalizing Debt Payoff;” “Phase B: Maximizing Total Recovery of Helium and Increasing Returns to the American Taxpayer;” and “Phase C: Access for Federal Users.” Phase A would begin on the bill’s date of enactment and end one year after the date of enactment. During Phase A, the BLM would be required to offer for sale at least as much helium as was offered for sale during FY 2012. Phase B would begin immediately after Phase A and end when the volume of recoverable crude helium in the Reserve reaches 3 billion scf. During Phase B, the BLM would balance factors involving the amount of production capable from the Reserve, program management, market supply and demand, and demand of Federal users when determining the annual quantity of crude helium to offer for sale. Phase C would begin when the volume of recoverable crude helium in the Reserve reaches 3 billion scf and presumably last until all recoverable helium has been exhausted from the Reserve. During Phase C, the BLM would be authorized to sell crude helium only for use by Federal agencies and Federal grant holders. The Department would also like to work with the committee on technical modifications to this section of the bill.

Other significant aspects of H.R. 527 involve requirements that sales of crude helium be conducted at auction and that the BLM disclose certain information related to the helium market and supply chain. The Department and the BLM are committed to ensuring that the public receives a fair return on publicly owned energy and related resources. The Department and the BLM are also firmly committed to making information about how government operates more accessible, and consider transparency and open government a high priority. The Department looks forward to discussing these issues further with the sponsors and the Committee, and the Administration continues to evaluate any cost implications of this legislation.

Finally, the bill also would require the Secretary of the Interior to complete several reports and studies on helium. These include global and national helium gas resource assessments, and, in coordination with the Secretary of Energy, national forecasts and global trends of helium demand and an inventory of helium uses in the United States. In addition, the bill would direct the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Energy to cooperate on any assessments and research relating to the extraction and refining of the isotope helium-3, and direct the Secretary of the Interior to assess the feasibility of establishing a facility to separate the isotope helium-3.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the Federal helium program and H.R. 527. The BLM welcomes further discussion about the Federal helium program and the BLM’s role in meeting future helium needs for the country, especially for Federal agencies that depend on helium for scientific research, aerospace projects, and defense purposes. Since its formal discovery almost 120 years ago, helium has proven to be an increasingly important natural resource. The expansion of helium-related technology and declining domestic reserves means the importance of helium as a strategic resource is likely to increase. The BLM continues to serve the country by effectively managing the Reserve, and working with natural gas producers to efficiently extract helium from natural gas. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.