Statement of the
Environmental Protection Agency
Before the
Committee on Science
House of Representatives
October 4, 2000

Chairman Sensenbrenner and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss issues of fairness and diversity in the context of science and the mission of EPA. The job of building an institutional culture at EPA that is fair, equitable and supportive of each member of our workforce is one we take seriously and receives our daily attention.

Since the beginning of the Clinton-Gore Administration, the Agency has worked hard to create and maintain a workforce that looks like America, to make management accountable with respect to diversity and fairness, and to fully develop the potential of each and every EPA employee. The Agency has made great progress in the last seven and one-half years towards this goal. This progress is based on EPA's longstanding commitment to diversity and our policy of not tolerating discrimination in any form, whether it be race, gender, religion, age, disability, or sexual orientation.

Our senior leadership recognizes that EPA's people are the key to achieving the mission of EPA. The environmental progress of the last 30 years has, in large measure, been powered by EPA's scientists, engineers, legal counsel, policy analysts, support professionals, and the managerial

corps that lead them. By creating a workplace where everyone feels valued, we are better able to meet the challenges of the 21st century and to deliver the results we seek for the American people.

Our efforts and hard work have led to a number of accomplishments of which we are very proud. Since 1992, minority representation in the Senior Executive Service has more than tripled. For women at the SES level, the increase has been 50 percent. We have changed the composition of EPA's highest senior level advisory committees to better reflect the Agency's workforce. In addition, minority representation in Grades 13 and above has increased by 116 percent since 1993 (from 1,086 in 1993 to 2,348 in 2000).

We have made great strides in improving the quality of our science, which is so critical to sound environmental decision-making. In addition, we have made significant progress with lead abatement, brownfields, Superfund and other programs that benefit the American public, but especially minority and low-income communities.

We understand that the environmental and public health challenges facing minority and low-income communities are often greater than those facing the public at large. Therefore, we have developed outreach strategies in an effort to forge stronger community partnerships, enhance our ongoing financial support to minority educational institutions, increase economic opportunities, and build a workforce that looks like the American people we serve. Under the Clinton-Gore Administration, EPA has worked hard to ensure that every family in every neighborhood enjoys a healthy environment. Every American should be able to enjoy clean water under clear skies in

homes and neighborhoods that are pollution free.

I am greatly troubled by the recent allegations made against the Agency. At the same time, it is important to put these allegations into a proper context that fairly describes our efforts to value our employees and achieve world class science. These allegations are not reflective of EPA's management, nor are they symptomatic of the Agency as a whole. The progress that the Agency has made in diversity, human resource development, and minority outreach is the direct result of our belief that these are the right things to do, and are the best way that the Agency can do its job of protecting the environment and public health of all people in our nation.

Fair Treatment for EPA Employees

EPA's policy on discipline is to emphasize preventing situations that might require discipline through effective communications, and to ensure that constructive – rather than punitive – corrective actions are taken by supervisors on a timely basis. In circumstances where it does become necessary to take disciplinary action, EPA follows a disciplinary process that provides for progressively more severe action before considering terminating any of its employees. Except for situations involving the most serious misconduct, employees are first counseled about conduct or performance problems and measures are taken to correct behavior. If these steps do not result in correction, and repeated misconduct occurs, termination is pursued only as a last resort. When disciplinary action is required, including the occasional removal, the Agency fully complies with all procedural and due process protections afforded by personnel regulations and collective

bargaining agreements with our unions. Statistics from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) indicate that EPA terminates employees at a rate one-third that of the government as a whole. We believe that our constructive, preventive approach is appropriate and successful.

EPA Employees Say They're Treated Fairly

An independent survey conducted in 1999 by the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) and OPM indicated that the average job satisfaction level of EPA employees (77%) is significantly higher than government (60%) and industry-wide (62%) averages. And survey results show that the great majority of EPA's employees believe their managers manage well (67% vs. 51% for the federal government as a whole). Data from these surveys verify that EPA staff consistently rate the Agency far above the Government-wide average and generally above the ratings that private sector employees give their own organizations in the areas of job satisfaction, supervisory effectiveness, sensitivity to individual differences (race, religion, gender, cultural background, etc.), and the quality of work produced.

Supporting EPA Scientists to Ensure Good Science

The Agency has demonstrated a strong commitment to sound science as the basis for our decisions and we have taken a number of strong actions to improve the quality of our science. The Agency has established peer review as a fundamental operating principle and there is now broad acceptance within the Agency that EPA peer review is effective in yielding science of the

highest quality. The progress that the Agency has made in peer review was recently lauded by both EPA's Science Advisory Board and the National Research Council. We continue to examine and refine our peer review procedures so that we may further enhance our scientific and technical quality.

In 1995, EPA's Office of Research and Development (ORD) was reorganized in response to recommendations from the Science Advisory Board and the National Research Council. This reorganization was based on the foundation of a risk-based framework for setting scientific priorities. In addition, the Agency established the EPA Science Policy Council (SPC), comprised of senior science officials from across the Agency and chaired by the Deputy Administrator. The SPC ensures that important scientific policies and guidelines are developed in a timely way and then receive the highest level of oversight as these policies are refined and improved. The SPC has made notable contributions to improving Agency peer review, children's health, risk characterization, cumulative risk, and risk assessment guidelines, and it is the SPC that is leading the effort toward integrated science planning across the Agency. The result of all of these actions and more has been greater confidence in the integrity of EPA's scientific decisions.

We are proud of the work occurring in our Office of Research and Development, with respect to their efforts in listening to and responding to the concerns of their scientists and other employees. ORD has conducted four annual organizational climate surveys. The most recent indicates that the majority of scientists feel the organization is improving the way it addresses issues of trust, job satisfaction, resources, work climate, and how management has handled challenging situations.

Responses to ORD's organizational climate survey indicate that EPA supports both its people and sound science. Overall, 75 percent of responding ORD employees stated that they were satisfied with their jobs. Eighty-six percent said that they are treated with respect by other employees, and 81 percent said that individual differences (gender, race, national origin, religion, age, cultural background, disabilities or sexual orientation) were respected by the work unit.

ORD has initiated innovative programs to hire more minority scientists, some of which are starting to bear fruit. For example, the Post Doctoral Program has been active for two years, and has attracted minority and women candidates into the programs and ORD laboratories. Over 100 positions are being filled through this program; by the end of this year, 20 percent of these positions will be filled by minorities and over 50 percent by women.

ORD also has agreements with the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO) and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) to provide opportunities for faculty members and students of minority colleges and universities to become involved with our laboratories while gaining experience and understanding of environmental protection activities as they relate to research and development. This year, each of our national research laboratories has hosted three faculty members from Historically Black College and University institutions. These faculty members spend a full semester working alongside EPA scientists in our research facilities. In 2001, we will continue this positive relationship with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and build on the idea by expanding the program to include several faculty and students from Hispanic Serving Institutions.

EPA science is enriched by the participation of these faculty members and students.

We have also engaged our employees and their elected union representatives in strengthening our already strong peer review-based science efforts. To this end, we have adopted as Agency policy the *Principles of Scientific Integrity*, proposed by our joint labor-management partnership council. It is essential that EPA's scientific and technical activities be of the highest quality and credibility. Honesty and integrity, in all our activities, are vital if the public is to have trust and confidence in EPA's decisions. Just last month, EPA's Labor-Management National Partnership Council adopted the Agency's first ever strategic plan for labor management partnership that commits the Agency management to consult with its labor partners early and often on issues of potential interest to our employees. Finally, we plan to ensure that our Science to Achieve Results (STAR) fellowships and grants program reflects the Agency's ongoing commitment to promoting diversity, while at the same time funding cutting-edge research and science.

Building on a Foundation of Fairness

In recent years we have worked hard to promote diversity and fairness in the EPA workplace. We have undertaken an intense and sustained level of activity, designed to build an institutional culture that is fair, equitable, and supportive of each member of our workforce. These efforts have included the collaborative creation of diversity action plans, training programs, and a thorough review of hiring, promotion, and award practices.

This effort began in 1997 with a series of listening sessions to hear concerns from our employees at all levels of the Agency. Based upon information gathered in those meetings, each Assistant and Regional Administrator developed and implemented a Diversity Action Plan (DAP) to address the concerns and perceptions of their employees. Between 1997 and 1999, the Agency's Director of Human Resources, Director of Civil Rights and Deputy Chief of Staff visited each Region and Headquarters office at least once, to discuss issues of concern to employees, share success stories from across EPA, and provide guidance to senior managers in that location on how to enhance diversity in their organizations. In June 1999, we held a Town Hall Forum to further showcase success stories and offer employees an opportunity to share their feelings and concerns about the DAP process.

In addition to the efforts of the Office of Human Resources and Organizational Services within the Office of Administration and Resources Management to work cooperatively with the rest of the Agency to address these high priority workforce issues, EPA restructured the Agency's Human Resources Council (HRC) to create a permanent core of career senior managers, union representatives, and employee group representatives to oversee diversity and human resource efforts. The HRC's mandate is to advise senior management on workforce-related issues. The HRC serves as a senior level group to monitor, measure and advise senior management on the Agency's progress in implementing workforce and diversity initiatives. We are proud that minority employees constitute a third of the Council.

Institutionalizing Our Efforts

EPA has taken a number of major steps to continue this legacy of change. To ensure continued progress on EPA's diversity goals and senior management accountability, we implemented the Agency's Framework for Senior Executive Service (SES) and Management Accountability, which includes new performance standards focused on diversity management. This Framework helps ensure fairness in program and regional offices and requires senior Agency managers to submit an Equal Employment Opportunity and Fairness Accomplishment Report on an annual basis. These reports are posted on EPA's intranet for all employees to view. In April 2000, we held a national meeting of EPA's SES corps to focus on human resources and diversity objectives. EPA's SES leaders spent two days discussing, sharing experiences, and coalescing around the Agency's diversity and human resources goals.

We have also established a formal alternative dispute resolution program, strengthened our employee counseling program and enhanced the staff devoted to working through disputes between managers and employees in an effort to avoid grievances. Most EPA locations now have awards boards, which include management and union representatives. These awards boards review award nominations and make recommendations on monetary awards for bargaining unit employees.

Through our extensive Hispanic Outreach Strategy, we have created a new template for future actions oriented towards other minorities, based not only on recruitment and employment, but also on educational, economic, and community partnership activities. We have aggressively

implemented the President's initiative to provide increased information and access to Federal services to Asian-Pacific Island Americans, and are patterning future activities based on lessons learned through the Hispanic Outreach Strategy.

The HRC has championed the Agency's first Human Resources Strategic Plan, which provides a roadmap for all of our employee development and diversity activities for the next five years. In addition, EPA's Workforce Development Strategy is a comprehensive, inclusive plan designed to yield an EPA workforce that will be equipped to handle the challenges of today as well as those EPA will face in the years to come. Under the direction of the Office of Human Resources and Organizational Services, with oversight by the HRC, we have made substantial progress in developing and implementing this strategy, which includes five components.

The Workforce Assessment Project established a baseline for both current skills and skill gaps in the present workforce, and looks forward twenty years to identify future required skills. The Leadership Development Program includes an approach to help create and sustain a high-performance organization, performance improvement tools for EPA managers, and an SES Candidate Development Program. The "New Skills/New Options" Program is a developmental program focused on our support staff, who are facing perhaps the greatest challenges in the workplace as a result of technology-driven changes. The Mid-Level Development Program identifies and provides generic, cross-cutting skills and competencies for intermediate employees. Finally, the EPA Professional Intern Program recruits, hires and develops high-quality, diverse employees who will be future leaders. In the three classes hired to date, nearly 50 percent are

minorities and 11 percent are disabled.

Sustaining the Commitment

In the last seven and one-half years at EPA, we have compiled an incredible record of working to improve the quality of life for the American public. We know that despite our advances, future progress requires continued commitment and hard work. And so, to build on our progress, and in keeping with our current commitments, we are taking the following important steps:

Increasing Management Accountability

EPA's performance standard policy holds senior leadership accountable for building and maintaining a diverse workplace that ensures fairness and equal opportunity. We have asked the Assistant Administrator for the Office of Administration and Resources Management to evaluate these performance standards in the next 60 days and to recommend ways to ensure better accountability. We have also asked all Assistant Administrators and Regional Administrators to review progress on their diversity action plans, to strengthen them where possible, and to ensure that they continue toward implementation.

Strengthening Civil Rights and Employee Relations Functions

The Office of Civil Rights will restructure the complaints process to make it more efficient consistent with the recommendations of the NPR/ Equal Employment Opportunity

Commission Interagency Federal Task Force. To expedite the elimination of the backlog, we are increasing resources by adding additional personnel to review complaints to ensure that all pending claims are processed promptly.

Additionally, we are taking steps to strengthen and expand the methods for solving workplace grievances and discrimination complaints at the informal counseling level. We will review the effectiveness of the current alternative dispute resolution program, strengthen our employee counseling program, and increase the staff devoted to working through disputes between managers and employees.

Our long-term goal is to create a positive work environment where employees no longer feel the need to enter the grievance or complaints process.

Improving Management and Diversity Training

We have directed the Office of Administration and Resources Management to evaluate current management and diversity training throughout the Agency in the next 60 days. Based on staff feedback and lessons learned from past training, we will expand successful training programs to other parts of the Agency.

Working with independent organizations to assess EPA's strengths and weaknesses

In the coming weeks, EPA will contract with a recognized national leader in workplace diversity to evaluate our existing policies and practices and make recommendations on

needed changes. We will also meet with other federal agencies and external organizations to obtain their best suggestions for workforce diversity improvements.

Closing

In closing, we need to continue to work just as hard as we have been working over the past seven and one-half years, to sustain a high quality of life for EPA employees. We will not rest in our efforts to ensure equal opportunity and fairness for all of our employees. In an agency as large as EPA, there will always be challenges, but we are committed to doing whatever is needed to achieve diversity and fairness in the EPA workplace.

Attachments