

Statement of Stephen A. Owens
Hearing on Nominations
Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice and
Regulatory Oversight
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate
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Chairman Merkley, Ranking Member Wicker and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to be here today.

I am extremely honored to be nominated by President Biden to be the Chairperson of the Chemical Safety & Hazard Investigation Board.

I have been a member of the CSB Board since February of this year, confirmed by the Senate last December. I became the agency's Interim Executive Authority in July after our former Chair resigned.

As I said when I appeared before you last year, the CSB is a small agency, but it has a very big – and very important – mission: to conduct investigations and make recommendations that help ensure that chemical facilities are operated safely and that the people who work in them -- and the families who live near them -- are protected from chemical disasters.

Since I have been the Interim Executive, I have worked closely with my fellow Board member, Sylvia Johnson -- and the dedicated career public servants at the CSB --

to address the serious challenges facing the agency, including reducing the backlog in investigative reports, addressing staff vacancies, improving morale, breaking down silos, and increasing communication between the CSB leadership and career staff.

For example, since late July, we have released the reports for three investigations: the fatal 2017 explosion at the Loy-Lange Box Company in St. Louis; the fatal 2016 fire at the Sunoco terminal in Nederland, Texas; and the 2019 fire and explosions at the PES refinery in Philadelphia.

Prior to issuing the Loy-Lange report in late July, the CSB had not released an investigation report in over ten months.

Going forward, we anticipate releasing the reports for another three investigations by the end of this calendar year.

In the last few years, the CSB has suffered serious attrition among our investigative and other critical staff, and fell to one of the lowest levels of career staff in its history.

Since I became the Interim Executive, we have hired a new Chief Information Officer to address the serious cybersecurity and information technology issues plaguing the CSB, and we will adding other IT staff soon. We onboarded a new chemical incident investigator and plan to hire several more in the months ahead. We also hired two

recommendations specialists, and we are recruiting other key staff as well.

Additionally, in September, we deployed a team to investigate the fatal fire and explosion at the BP-Husky Refinery in Ohio. This was the first deployment that the CSB had undertaken in 14 months.

We also have increased transparency and are providing more information to the public and our stakeholders.

For example, we have begun to post data on chemical incidents that we receive under the agency's reporting rule.

We also have reinstated public comments at CSB Board meetings.

And in September, we issued updates on four investigations, including the 2020 fatal explosion and fire at the Optima Belle facility in West Virginia and the fatal 2021 liquid nitrogen release at the Foundation Food Group facility in Georgia.

The agency had stopped providing these updates last year, but we believe that they provide important information to the public and stakeholders.

In the next few weeks, we plan to issue an update on another investigation – the fatal 2021 explosion and fire at the Yenkin-Majestic facility in Ohio.

The Chemical Safety Board began operations in January 1998. As we approach the 25th anniversary of the CSB, I am very optimistic about the agency's future. I strongly believe that we can rebuild and revitalize the CSB and perform our mission as Congress intended. I look forward to working with this Committee to do that.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you.