Opening Statement of Ranking Member Whitehouse
Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Hearing: "Improving Future Management of the Superfund Program."
April 9, 2025

I'd like to start by thanking Chair Capito for holding this hearing, and our witnesses for testifying today.

We're here today to talk about improving EPA's Superfund program, one of the best tools for holding polluters accountable for contamination at our country's most polluted sites. These sites exist in every state in our nation, and they are complex; cleanups can be laborious and long to complete.

Rhode Island has a long history of support for the program. Senator John Chafee, former chairman of this committee, authored the Superfund program in 1980. His son and my predecessor, Lincoln Chafee, then chaired the Superfund subcommittee and championed bipartisan legislation to support the program, including authorizing the Brownfields program.

I am happy here today to continue their legacy of support for the program and address bottlenecks in the cleanup process.

However, speed must not come at the cost of efficacy. Scientists, engineers, and project managers ensure that cleanups are done right. Investigators and lawyers identify responsible parties and hold them accountable. EPA employees in these roles have specialized experience with specific sites and communities—institutional knowledge and relationships that, once lost, have to be rebuilt.

Budget, staff, and speed are related. As we will hear from Mr. Gómez, when annual appropriations declined from roughly $2 billion to $1.1 billion, spending on remediation fell by roughly half. Unsurprisingly, the average project completion time increased from 2.6 to 4 years and significant delays affected one third of long-term projects. When budgets are cut, work slows down.

At his confirmation hearing before this Committee, Administrator Zeldin appeared before us here and committed to following the law. But slashing 65 percent of EPA's budget, and pushing out agency staff until there is no one to left to execute the law, violates the promises Administrator Zeldin made, and will do immeasurable damage to American families. He said he would defer to the professional scientists at EPA, and then turns around and plans to remove EPA's independent scientific research office. Without such expertise, how do we make our country's most polluted sites safe?

For Superfund, it will delay cleanups and prolong communities' exposure to harmful pollution. Let's be clear: the winners from slashing EPA's budget and staffing and kneecapping the Superfund program are the planet's biggest polluters. They're behind this.

Administrator Zeldin sat in this room and said climate change was real and must be addressed with urgency. Now he mockingly refers to the "climate change religion" and applauds himself for "driving a dagger straight into [its] heart."

But climate change will compromise the safety of Superfund sites. According to GAO, 60 percent of EPA's Superfund sites are located in areas prone to flooding, storm surge, and/or wildfires. EPA has been integrating climate change resilience into its Superfund efforts. We need to plan for severe storms occurring more frequently, coastal communities flooding more severely, and wildfires scorching areas they haven't before. Superfund staff look ahead when conducting 5-year reviews to see what amelioration or containment efforts need adjusting.

To be good stewards of taxpayer dollars, we must ensure that climate risk remains part of the Superfund site evaluation process. Otherwise, severe weather events will wreak havoc on sites that were previously considered safe.

There are changes that can be made to improve the Superfund program, and I am glad we are here today to discuss them. However, if the Trump-Musk administration maintains its slash-and-burn approach, then it won't matter what improvements we propose here today.