STATEMENT OF THOMAS A. BURKE
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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
BEFORE THE
SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE
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Good afternoon Chairman Boxer, Ranking Member Vitter and other Members of the Committee.

It is an honor to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to be Assistant Administrator for Research and Development for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

I have devoted my career to advancing public health and environmental protection. For more that 35 of EPA's 43 years, I have worked closely with the agency as a state scientist, public health official, research investigator, member of the Science Advisory Board and member of the Board of Scientific Counselors. I have also served on the Board on Environmental Studies and Toxicology of the National Academy of Sciences and chaired a number of major Academy studies of EPA science.

As it is with most people, my interests were shaped by my early experiences. Growing up in Jersey City in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, I have vivid memories of my early environment before there was an EPA - the musty smell of low tide in New York Harbor; the summer spraying of DDT; the incinerators; the cleaning solvents from the industrial laundry behind our tenement apartment; the black plumes from the Jersey Central locomotives; and the "Chemical Mountains" – giant slag heaps from the chromium factories one block from my childhood home.

I also had an early interest in health and disease. Born with a congenital heart defect, I was blessed to have life-saving open heart surgery at Johns Hopkins. Three of my close childhood friends were not so fortunate; they died from leukemia and brain cancer.

My interests in the connection between environment and health were galvanized during my graduate studies at the University of Texas when the National Cancer Institute released an atlas of cancer mortality showing that my home state led the nation in cancer deaths. The media dubbed it “Cancer Alley”.

After graduate school, I was named Director of the New Jersey Office of Cancer and Toxic Substances Research. I led the early research that shaped many state and national approaches into identifying and reducing toxic and cancer causing pollutants in the environment, including: ensuring safe drinking water, reducing toxic releases and cleanup of hazardous wastes. I also investigated childhood cancer clusters.

As a state scientist leading scientific investigations, I served three governors, both Republicans and Democrats. I stood at their sides during environmental emergencies like the dioxin contamination of the Ironbound section of Newark, the chromium pollution in Jersey City, and the closure of our beaches from sewage spills and medical waste. I was also fortunate to work with the late Senator Frank Lautenberg on his efforts to improve chemical safety and prevent cancer. These experiences have given me a practical perspective on the importance of strong science to guide difficult environmental health decisions. I am proud that New Jersey is now a leader in environmental protection and a national example of the important link between a healthy environment and economic growth.

At Johns Hopkins, I have devoted myself to improving the application of science to environmental policy decision-making. As Director of the Johns Hopkins Risk Sciences and Public Policy Institute, my colleagues and I work to advance the science of evaluating and communicating risk through education, research and technical assistance. I am proud that we trained many of the emerging leaders in environmental science policy. We have also worked closely with state and local officials and our Federal agencies on numerous critical issues including emergency preparedness, chemical exposures of our troops, the toxic floodwaters of Katrina, nuclear waste cleanup, and the safety of our food supply.

Through the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the EPA Science Advisory Board (SAB), I have worked to advance science at EPA – to do better science to address the needs of decision-makers. I chaired the NAS Committee on Improving Risk Analysis that produced the report *Science and Decisions*, providing a framework for the future of risk assessment. I also chaired the EPA SAB Committee on Science Integration, recommending ways to get the best science to inform EPA decisions.

While I have not been shy about pushing EPA to do better science, I have a deep respect for the work of the Agency scientists. Science is indeed the "backbone" of EPA decision-making, and has been the foundation of our nation's environmental progress over the past four decades.

I believe that those tasked with making these important decisions regarding environmental protection for the public good need to be informed by the best science. Science that is credible, transparent, and inclusive.

If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Members of this Committee, stakeholders in business and industry, state and local partners, and the broader scientific community to make sure we are asking the right questions and getting the best scientific answers.

I thank you Chairman Boxer and Members of the Committee for this opportunity to meet with you today. I am happy to answer any questions.