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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement
Ranking Member Stacey Plaskett

Hearing on “Examining GAO Findings on Deficiencies at the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement”
Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy and Environment

March 21, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing.

Nearly seven years ago, an explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon* offshore oil rig caused 11 crewman deaths and leaked approximately 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. This spill caused immense environmental and economic damage to the gulf region and its residents, for which B.P paid out nearly \$62 billion.

A special commission was formed to investigate the explosion. The Department of the Interior Inspector General also investigated, as did Interior’s Outer Continental Shelf Safety Oversight Board. Each issued reports making a number of recommendations to Interior to ensure the safety of offshore rigs. The newly formed Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, or BSEE (Bessie), was tasked with implementing these recommendations.

Among other suggestions, the reports recommended that Interior, quote, “develop an inspection program with strong representation at all levels of the Bureau;” quote, “identify sufficient inspection coverage, including reassessing the risk-based and self-inspection approaches;” and quote, “conduct advanced planning of inspections to allow inspectors time to prepare for each inspection and ensure efficient use of resources.”

Yet, a Government Accountability Office report released in 2016—five years after many of these recommendations were issued—found that, quote, “BSEE continues to face deficiencies” in its investigation, environmental compliance, and safety enforcement capabilities that, quote, “undermine its ability to effectively oversee offshore oil and gas development.”

Now, a year later, GAO has issued another report indicating that BSEE is not doing everything it can to protect workers. The report found, for example, that BSEE halted pilot testing of a risk-based inspection initiative which it developed in 2012, due to deficiencies that GAO attributed to mismanagement of the initiative from the beginning. This initiative would

have ensured the most dangerous rigs were inspected with more frequency and diligence, possibly saving lives.

Worker lives are at risk, and BSEE must implement GAO's recommendations soon.

The findings of the Inspector General and Oversight Board reports point to the important role of the federal government in protecting the lives of offshore oil workers. As President Trump fulfills his campaign promise to "lift the restrictions on the production of shale, oil, natural gas, and clean oil," those restrictions must not be worker safety regulations, and government agencies like BSEE must properly inspect drilling sites and stringently enforce the rules.

This is particularly important given the Interior Department's recent announcement that it will offer 73 million acres offshore in the gulf to new oil and gas development later this year. We need to fix these problems before even more lives are on the line.

I'll conclude today by noting that often, especially here in Washington, D.C., politics is treated like a game to be won or lost. But let me tell you, this is not a game. American workers' lives are at stake.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.