Testimony by Rep. Carolyn McCarthy
Water Resources Subcommittee
September 18, 2008

- Thank you Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson and members of the Committee for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify.

- I commend the Chairwoman you for all your hard work to keep our nation's waters clean, not just by holding this hearing but also moving the Water Resources Development Act and Beach Protection Act—important legislation to ensure that our beaches are safe for swimming which the House took up before we entered the summer beach season.

- I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you specifically about pharmaceuticals in our nation's waters.

- As you know, when the House took up H.R. 2537, the Beach Protection Act of 2007, I offered and withdrew an amendment to the bill. We engaged in a colloquy about pharmaceuticals in our nation's waters, I asked that hearings be held, and we agreed to work together on legislation to address this issue.

- That brings us here today and I commend the Committee for acknowledging that we must begin to better understand this important issue so that our constituents can feel confidant that they are drinking clean, safe water.

- An Associated Press study from March brought to light the fact that pharmaceuticals have been found in the drinking water supply of at least 41 million Americans.

- Last week, the AP did a follow-up study that found that even more Americans were affected by the contaminated water—approximately 46 million people.

- In my state of New York, health officials found heart medicine, infection fighters, estrogen, mood stabilizer and a tranquilizer in the upstate water supply.

- Six pharmaceuticals were found in the drinking water right here in Washington, D.C.

- We don't know how the pharmaceuticals enter the water supply.

- But it is likely that some medications that are not fully absorbed by the body, may have passed into the water through human waste.

- In some other cases, unused pills may have simply been flushed down the toilet.

- Additionally, some agricultural products and medications may have run off into groundwater supplies.

- In addition to antibiotics and steroids, EPA has identified over 100 individual pharmaceuticals and personal care products in environmental samples and drinking water.

- Wastewater treatment plants appear to be unable to completely remove pharmaceuticals from the water.

- The presence of the pharmaceuticals in our nation's waters raises serious questions about the effects on human health and wildlife.

- I, along with my colleagues Representative Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin and Allyson Schwartz of Pennsylvania, have introduced legislation that would require EPA to conduct a study on the presence and source of pharmaceuticals and personal care products, in our nation's drinking water.

- Pharmaceuticals and personal care products include prescription and over-the-counter therapeutic drugs, veterinary drugs, fragrances, lotions, and cosmetics, as well as products used to enhance growth or health of livestock.

- H.R. 6820, the Water Assessment and Treatment Evaluation Research Study Act of 2008, or WATER Study Act, includes a three-part report

to be carried out by EPA working with other relevant Federal agencies.

- An initial report, due in one year after the bill is passed, calls for an analysis of what pharmaceuticals and personal care products are in the water, where they came from, and how we can regularly monitor for them.

- An interim report due in 3 years looks at the effects the products have on human and animal health, as well as methods to remove the products from our drinking water supply.

- A final report asks for an analysis of the long term effects of human exposure to pharmaceuticals in our waters and the levels at which the products in our water become harmful.

- The report is broken into three pieces because many interested groups explained the difficult in completing a report with all of the elements too soon but some items we can know pretty quickly and can begin to respond to initial findings.

- Furthermore, initial results will prompt responses from the scientific community which can also help form the basis of the items to be studied in the future reports.

- The final report asks for an update on all of the findings from in the initial and second reports.

- The report will be used as part of the government's efforts to better understand the effects of pharmaceuticals in our waters have on human health aquatic wildlife.

- I want to stress that my legislation is not intended to make any presumptions or accusations or even say that a problem does exist.

- We are just looking for more information so that we can make better informed choices and eventually move forward on more sensible policies.

- Hopefully, the study will give us more information about the presence, source, and effects of pharmaceuticals in our waters so that we can begin efforts to ensure that the water is safe.

- We need to find out how these contaminants got in the water, what the risks are and what steps we need to take to solve the problem.

- We need to know; how are the pharmaceuticals entering the water supply?

- How much is in the water?

- What else is in the water that we do not yet know about?

- What are the effects on human health and aquatic and plant life?

- What is the best way to dispose of pharmaceuticals?

- And how should we treat water that has been contaminated with pharmaceuticals and other personal care products?

- How is existing Federal legislation such as the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act sufficient to address the new products we are finding in out waters?

- It is vital that Congress take up and champion the cause of keeping our coastal recreation and drinking water safe.

- This is a public health issue and we must act before the presence of pharmaceuticals reaches crisis levels.

- This study is a first and very important step in the process of addressing this issue.

- We need to accurately assess the risks of these contaminants in the water because some experts have suggested that the problem will only

increase as prescriptions are on the rise—up 12 percent over the last five years.

- I know that my bill, H.R. 6820, has been referred to the Energy and Commerce Committee because it focuses so much on addressing safe drinking water in specific but I do recognize that this Committee handles the Clean Water Act and it so important that we look at all of our nation's waters as well, including source water, to see where the problem begins.

- We can't fully address safe drinking water without looking at the entire water cycle.

- I look forward to working with all interested parties, including the EPA, the water treatment companies, the drug companies, agricultural interests, and others to combat this issue.

- Before dropping the bill, we reached out to many different parties and will continue to talk. I know that we can come to agreement on this issue, including efforts to educate people about safe disposal of medications.

- Madam Chairwoman, I again commend the Committee for holding this very important hearing, would be happy to answer any questions, and look forward to hearing the testimony of the other witnesses, the real experts.

- Thank you.