

Submitted by Daniel Schuman, Policy Director, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington; Amy Bennett, Assistant Director, OpenTheGovernment.org, on behalf of the organizations listed below.

The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen
Chair, Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee
S-128 The Capitol

The Honorable John Hoeven
Ranking Member Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee
S-128 The Capitol

VIA EMAIL

RE: Funding the Office of Technology Assessment as part of the Fiscal Year 2015
Appropriations Bill

March 11, 2014

Dear Chairwoman Shaheen, Ranking Member Hoeven, and members of the Legislative
Branch Appropriations Subcommittee:

We are writing to urge you to restore funding to the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). The important issues facing Congress frequently require technological and scientific assessments, and lawmakers need expertise to understand the capabilities, costs, and benefits and risks of these new tools. OTA provided this information in a unique way, combining deep expertise, the ability to talk to stakeholders, and a unique bipartisan board that ensured the findings of OTA's reports were relevant, substantive, and unbiased. In light of recent debates over national security and telecommunications policy, Congress needs its own source of technological expertise.

OTA was created in 1972 to equip Congress with "new and effective means for securing competent, unbiased information concerning the physical, biological, economic, social, and political effects" of technology. In the words of a Congressional Research Service Report, OTA "was intended to facilitate congressional access to expertise and permit legislators to consider objectively information presented by the executive branch, interest groups, and other stakeholders to controversial policy questions."¹

At its height, OTA generated hundreds of reports at a relatively modest cost of \$20 million annually.² It was defunded in 1995 along with other entities like the Administrative Conference of the United States, which itself was restored in 2010.³

¹ "Technology Assessment in Congress: History and Legislative Options," Congressional Research Service RS21586 (August 21, 2006), available at <https://openocrs.com/document/RS21586/2006-08-21/>.

² These reports were released to the public and are available here: <http://ota.fas.org/otareports/>.

³ <http://www.acus.gov/newsroom/administrative-fix-blog/acus-nutshell>

Public interest advocates have called repeatedly for OTA to resume operations.⁴ Indeed, the model is so respected that the President's Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies recommended recreating the OTA "within the Civil Liberties and Privacy Protection Board to assess Intelligence Community technology initiatives and support privacy-enhancing technologies."⁵

Technology plays a central role in our lives, from biomedicine to banking, from national security to new energy sources. Congress needs an independent source of expertise it can trust. Please restore funding for OTA.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you further. Please contact Daniel Schuman, policy director, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, at 202-408-5565 or Amy Bennett, assistant director, OpenTheGovernment.org, at 202-332-6736.

Sincerely yours,

American Association of Law Libraries
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington – CREW
Center for Democracy & Technology
Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists
Center for Study of Responsive Law
Council on American-Islamic Relations – CAIR
Cyber Privacy Project
Electronic Frontier Foundation
Federation of American Scientists
Essential Information
Government Accountability Project – GAP
iSolon.org
National Lawyers Guild
New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute
OpenTheGovernment.org
Project On Government Oversight – POGO
Public Knowledge
Sunlight Foundation

⁴ See, e.g., "Ninety Diverse Organizations Support Restoring the OTA," (May 7, 2010), available at http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/scientific_integrity/OTA-sign-on-letter-1.pdf; "OTA Endorsement," (June 1, 2007), available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/johnarthurw/529928064/in/photostream/>; "Carl Sagan Bemoans the Loss of OTA," (February 27, 2014), available at <http://ota.fas.org/2014/02/27/carl-sagan-bemoans-loss-of-ota/>.

⁵ "Liberty and Security In a Changing World," The President's Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies (December 12, 2013), Recommendation 27 on page 36, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2013-12-12_rg_final_report.pdf