

**Remarks by Dr. John P. Holdren – As Delivered
Before the DOJ-NIST Commission on Forensic Science
2/3/2014**

- Good morning everyone! Thank you for including me in the agenda this morning. Standing between you and your lunch, I will take just a few minutes.
- First, let me echo the previous speakers in saying how extremely gratifying it is to look around the table at the members of this newly formed group, and—speaking for the President as well as for myself—how grateful this Administration is for your volunteering to help strengthen this very important domain of science and science policy. This body clearly has the intellectual and professional gravitas needed to tackle the challenges before us.
- I think you all appreciate this already, but let me say it plainly: The responsibility you are taking on is extremely important. I work every day on the task of strengthening Federal support for and capabilities in science and engineering, but it is not every day that this task bears so directly on such a foundational concept of the American republic: Justice under the law.
- It is one thing to fall short in, say, theoretical physics, with the major consequence perhaps being a delayed deepening of our understanding of the how the world operates.
 - Arguably worse than that is falling short in, say, applied physics or engineering, leading, for example, to the failure of some crucial piece of technology.
 - And perhaps worse yet—indeed, it can be heartbreaking—is when we fall short in medical science—when, for example, a clinical trial fails to offer the hoped-for benefits against a deadly disease.
- But it is truly tragic when a shortcoming in forensic science contributes to the unjust deprivation of an individual’s liberty or even life.

- We owe it to ourselves as the world’s leading democracy to ensure that the science we bring to the courtroom, and the scientific testimony that conveys it, is absolutely as good as it can be.
- I can tell you from conversations I’ve had in the White House that the President feels strongly about this as well—that we must be at the top of our game when it comes to the use of science in the criminal justice system.
- As you heard in his State of the Union address last week, the President is deeply committed to addressing sources of injustice in this Nation. Forensic science, well grounded and rigorously practiced, offers us a lever for counteracting inequality and unfairness in our criminal justice system, for preventing and correcting injustice. It is a lever to ensure that wrong-doers are correctly identified and fairly tried, and that those wrongly accused are exonerated.
- Unfortunately, as we all know, a number of rigorous analyses of the current state of the art in forensic sciences have found that some of the disciplines in this domain are built on less-than-robust scientific bases or are lacking in uniformity and standardization. I don’t need to review the details of those findings here, nor do I need to reiterate in detail what we all know to be true: That strengthening the forensic sciences is a complicated challenge that will demand not just building a better foundation of science but also overcoming some long-standing structural and cultural barriers to best practices.
- At the same time, I am happy to be able to say that the Administration has done some solid groundwork in this arena already, and that ongoing work being coordinated by my office and other parts of the Administration promises to undergird and complement the work you are about to begin.
 - Today OSTP posted on our Website a document that highlights advances this Administration has made in the domains of forensic science research, practice, and policy, and I encourage you to look at that document to see how active we have been.
- For example, the interagency National Science and Technology Council, which my office oversees, created a subcommittee on forensic science

whose efforts have recently been condensed into a series of white papers on topics including

- accreditation;
- certification (both generally for forensics practitioners and in particular for medico-legal death investigators);
- proficiency testing; and
- professional ethics.

These white papers are now in the final stages of review for release, and I am confident they will prove useful to this commission.

- In addition, my office last summer created a new position—OSTP Assistant Director for Forensic Science, filled by Tania Simoncelli, who is attending these meetings—specifically to identify and implement options that the executive branch can pursue to strengthen the forensic sciences.
 - Under Tania’s leadership—and in coordination with an ad hoc group of representatives from DOJ, NIST, the National Institute of Justice, and the National Science Foundation—a number of promising mechanisms are being explored that could help strengthen and prioritize national forensic-science research efforts, including:
 - mechanisms to reduce fragmentation within the forensics community and enhance collaboration between forensic practitioners and academic scientists, and;
 - mechanisms for spurring solutions to a number of technical and conceptual problems in forensics—for example through the launching of one or more incentive prizes.
- In addition, the NSF recently circulated a Dear Colleague letter offering grant opportunities for innovative approaches to a number of problems relevant to forensics, and is now considering submissions it received for possible funding.
- NIST is funding and directly participating in a number of important forensics-related studies, including work on ballistics markings and rapid DNA analysis.
 - NIST also recently opened a new high-tech facility to study the forensic aspects of fire and arson.

- And NIST is working hard to reconstitute in improved fashion and with much-needed administrative support discipline-specific forensic-science “guidance groups,” which promise to build on the work of the field’s predecessor “scientific working groups.” I believe you will be hearing more about this tomorrow.
- The National Institute of Justice—under the game-changing leadership of John Laub earlier in the Administration, and currently under the continued solid leadership of Acting Director Greg Ridgeway—has been funding an impressive array of rigorous research projects directly relevant to the issues raised by the 2009 National Academies report.
- As a last point about ongoing progress, I want to give a shout-out to the FBI for the impressive work it is doing as it reviews thousands of cases involving the reporting of hair-analysis test results. The Bureau’s decision to reassess that past work in the light of evidence that had called some reports into question—and its decision to conduct that review in collaboration with the Innocence Project and the National Association for Criminal Defense Lawyers—speaks volumes about the shared desire for fairness and scientific integrity by the relevant players in this Administration.
- Clearly, there is a lot more work to be done—and not just on the Federal level, but on the state and local levels, where most of the Nation’s forensic service providers operate today. But the wheels are turning, and I know you will add great momentum to the process.
- Indeed, you have a unique opportunity to make a difference. But it will not be easy. You will need to work hard together to find paths forward through this difficult terrain. I am confident that you will do that; that you won’t flinch when it comes to shining a light on the things that need to be fixed; and that you won’t give up when solutions prove difficult to craft.
- Let me just thank you once more, then, for agreeing to take on this task, and for the hard but incredibly important work you are going to do. I appreciate it and, more importantly, the President appreciates it.