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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman Chairman, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform H.R. 6575, the "Over-Classification Reduction Act" July 23, 2008

Today, Ranking Member Davis and I introduced H.R. 6575, the Over-Classification Reduction Act. It seeks to address the ongoing problem in the federal government of over-classification.

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, popularly known as the 9/11 Commission, recommended limiting unnecessary classification of documents and providing incentives for information sharing. Seven years has passed since those horrific events and our government still is not sharing important information.

Let me be clear: there is some information that must be protected because it could easily threaten our national security. However, there is a tendency to overprotect information, and that has adverse consequences as well. Over-classification actually hurts our efforts to fight terrorism because it prevents agencies from sharing important information with relevant stakeholders including state and local law enforcement and even other federal agencies. In addition, it undermines public access to this important information.

The bill before us would call on the Archivist to promulgate regulations to prevent the over-classification of information. In addition to reducing over-classification, the Archivist would consider what classified information should be prepared in an unclassified format. Agencies would be required to give employees training and the opportunity to challenge classifications and agency Inspectors General would randomly audit classified information to ensure that it is properly marked.

Although we have not had the opportunity to hold a hearing on this legislation because of the tight congressional calendar, our Committee has had a number of oversight hearings on this issue. Those hearings demonstrated a need for action on this issue. I urge all of my colleagues to support this measure.