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Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte

Press Releases

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Chairman Goodlatte Announces Comprehensive Review of Copyright Law

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Washington, D.C. - Today House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) announced that the Judiciary Committee will conduct a comprehensive review of U.S. copyright law over the coming months. This announcement was made before the World Intellectual Property Day celebration at the Library of Congress. Below are his remarks as delivered:

Chairman Goodlatte: "As we mark World Intellectual Property Day today in the Jefferson Building, I would point out that the U.S. Copyright Office first opened in this building in 1897 under the direction of our nation's first Register of Copyrights, Thorvald Solberg, who served as Register for the next 33 years. During his tenure as Register, Solberg oversaw the implementation of the Third Revision of America's copyright law in 1909 that modernized the copyright law for that era in ways that seem quaint today. For example, he oversaw the extension of copyright protection to the new technology known as motion pictures. The 1909 Copyright Act passed through the Congressional Committee on which I serve as Chairman, the House Committee on the Judiciary.

The discussions during the early 1900's over the need to update American copyright laws to respond to new technology were not the first time such discussions occurred and they will certainly not be the last. Formats such as photographs, sound recordings, and software along with ways to access such formats including radio, television, and the Internet did not exist when the Constitution recognized intellectual property. My Committee has repeatedly held similar discussions about new forms of intellectual property as they arose and enacted laws as appropriate. Driven by new technologies and business models, a number of changes to copyright law went into effect in 1976.

Technology continues to rapidly advance. Contrast how American citizens kept up with the latest news in Boston last week to when Paul Revere rode nearby to warn the local communities of the British advance in 1775. Our Founding Fathers could never have imagined a day in which citizens would be able to immediately access the knowledge and news of the world on their smartphones as they walk down the street.

When I was first elected to Congress in 1993, only 2.5 percent of Americans had Internet access and less than ¼ of one percent of the world population did. Then, we spoke about the very few who had Internet access. Today, we speak about the few who do not. Technological development has increased at an exponential rate.

Recognizing the importance of the Internet, I was an original founder of the Congressional Internet Caucus in 1996. Over the years, I have seen the need to better understand how new technologies impact our laws. For example, until 1998

online service providers risked being held liable under copyright law for the actions of their subscribers over content they had no control over. I personally spent months meeting with various interested parties in an effort to develop a legislative solution to address such problems.

Just as Register Solberg recognized the need to update of our nation's copyright laws in the early 1900's to accommodate new technologies, our current Register, Maria Pallante, has also perceived a need to do so. Last month, she testified before my Committee about her desire for the "next great copyright act." Much of her testimony was about policy issues that have arisen due to the advance of technology.

There is little doubt that our copyright system faces new challenges today. The Internet has enabled copyright owners to make available their works to consumers around the world, but has also enabled others to do so without any compensation for copyright owners. Efforts to digitize our history so that all have access to it face questions about copyright ownership by those who are hard, if not impossible, to locate. There are concerns about statutory license and damage mechanisms. Federal judges are forced to make decisions using laws that are difficult to apply today. Even the Copyright Office itself faces challenges in meeting the growing needs of its customers - the American public.

So it is my belief that a wide review of our nation's copyright laws and related enforcement mechanisms is timely. I am announcing today that the House Judiciary Committee will hold a comprehensive series of hearings on U.S. copyright law in the months ahead. The goal of these hearings will be to determine whether the laws are still working in the digital age. I welcome all interested parties to submit their views and concerns to the Committee.

I also look forward to working with the Register and the Copyright Office that has served Congress well since its creation over 110 years ago. There is much work to be done."

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