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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce

“Exploring the Offline and Online Collection and Use of Consumer Information” Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection and the Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet November 19, 2009

Today’s hearing will explore ways that companies collect and use personal information. Chairman Boucher and Chairman Rush and Ranking Members Barton and Stearns have been leaders on this issue for a number of years, and I want to work with you in developing solutions that can better inform consumers and enable them to safeguard their privacy.

The collection, use, and dissemination of consumer information provide many benefits to consumers, businesses, and the marketplace. But they raise legitimate concerns about whether consumers have adequate control over personal information that is shared.

Sophisticated business models and rapidly-evolving technologies allow vast amounts of data to be collected, aggregated, analyzed, mined, and sold in ways that were unimaginable only 10 years ago. Many of these business practices conflict with consumers’ expectations of privacy.

As today’s testimony will show, a surprising number of American consumers incorrectly believe that certain information sharing practices are illegal. In fact, consumers have few rights with respect to the collection and use of much of their personal information. Even experienced consumers can have difficulty navigating offline and online data collection practices or understanding their rights.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses. I also look forward to working with my colleagues to give consumers tools to protect their privacy without unduly burdening industry or stifling innovation.