

**WASHINGTON** – Chairman Vernon J. Ehlers and other members of the House Administration Committee, in a hearing Thursday, strongly expressed their concerns to officials from the Smithsonian Institution about a controversial contract that some say could unfairly restrict the use of the Smithsonian's resources.

In questioning Smithsonian Institution Secretary Lawrence Small and members of his staff about the institution's handling of a 30-year contract with CBS/Showtime to create a venture called "Smithsonian on Demand," Ehlers expressed two basic concerns about the contract – its duration and its lack of transparency.

Ehlers, R-Michigan, explained that initial efforts in late April by the committee to obtain the contract were rebuffed by the Smithsonian officials, who said they had a confidentiality agreement with CBS/Showtime that precluded them from sharing it. Earlier this week, Smithsonian officials agreed to provide a heavily redacted version of the contract. Further discussions and pressure led to the officials agreeing to provide a complete copy of the contract.

Critics of the deal say that it will place restrictions on the use of Smithsonian resources by commercial filmmakers, including documentary makers, who say the deal will require them to work with Showtime to gain access to Smithsonian resources, a claim that Smithsonian officials dispute.

"For two (television) series in particular, NOVA for science and the American Experience for history, this access is their lifeblood," testified Margaret Drain, vice president of national programming for public television station WGBH of Boston. "For them, access to the Smithsonian is critical. Over the years we have benefited enormously from access to the Smithsonian Museums."

Ehlers said the lack of transparency associated with the contract is feeding the concerns of Congress and outside groups.

"The key here is transparency," Ehlers said. "We expect all entities receiving funds from the Congress to recognize their public obligation to be open and transparent about their activities so

that there is clear accounting for the funds that are used and expended. I want to make sure that is clearly engraved on your minds at this point.”

Ehlers and other committee members also expressed their concerns about the 30-year length of the contract.

“There is considerable nervousness about the 30-year term,” Ehlers said. “As someone commented to me, the only common document in the United States with a 30-year term is a mortgage on a home and when it is finished, you actually own the home. I’m not sure that’s a good precedent for government contracts, so that may not be a good comparison here.”

Ehlers said his staff will review the full contract and will consider further action after that review.

□ **To view an archived webcast of the entire hearing (total running time 2 hours, 36 minutes),**

**click on this link (REQUIRES RealPlayer to view):**

**<http://boss.streamos.com/real/houseadmin/05252006-final.smi>**