

WASHINGTON, Wednesday, July 26— Alabama's 21-month backlog in testing DNA evidence could be reduced under legislation approved by the House Judiciary Committee today, said U.S. Rep. Spencer Bachus (R-AL).

"Every day, the use of DNA evidence is becoming a more important tool in solving crimes, convicting the guilty and exonerating the innocent. The problem is that the crime laboratories capable of performing DNA analysis are woefully underfunded. Inadequate resources combined with the growing demand for DNA testing threatens to undermine the power of this crime-fighting tool," said Bachus, a member of the committee and co-sponsor of the bill.

Bachus said the committee approved a bill today authorizing \$50 million over the next five years to help states reduce their backlogs of DNA samples awaiting analysis. Now the bill will be scheduled for a vote by the House.

"This extra funding could be especially helpful to Alabama, allowing the Department of Forensic Sciences to pay for more investigators, new equipment and better work spaces. But it is only a first step. Congress needs to go further by passing legislation I've co-sponsored that directs \$700 million in new federal grants to state crime labs," said Bachus.

"DNA evidence convicts the guilty and allows the innocent to go free. But today there is a 21-month delay in that happening. That means victims of crime and their families have to wait two or more years to get justice and those who are falsely charged have to wait that long to finally be exonerated," said Bachus. "The emotional, physical and financial toll this takes on the judicial system is incalculable. There are a lot of problems money can't fix, but this is not one of them. Money can buy the resources needed to eliminate the bottleneck."

All states require some or all of their convicted offenders to provide DNA samples to the state. In 1994 Congress enacted legislation that gave the FBI the authority to create a national database of these DNA samples. The Combined DNA Index System — or CODIS, as it is known — has grown dramatically, to the point that today there are almost 400,000 samples on file of known state offenders. But there are also over 350,000 more samples that have been collected but have yet to be entered into this system by the states.

"DNA testing is not cheap," said Bachus. "DNA analysis of crime scene evidence can cost over \$2,000. We can and must do more to help local crime labs eliminate their DNA evidence backlog. Inadequate resources for state and local crime labs has led to a serious backlog in Alabama, so serious that one defendant in a capital murder case has suggested his constitutional right to a speedy trial was violated because of the delay in DNA testing. In other instances, victims in Alabama have had to wait for DNA evidence that is crucial to bringing their attackers to justice."

Congress appropriated \$15 million this fiscal year to help states eliminate their convicted offender backlog. An additional \$15 million was allocated so that states can upgrade their forensic lab capacities.