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MITA Urges Congress to Safeguard Access to Critical Helium Supply

Washington, D.C. – The Medical Imaging & Technology Alliance (MITA) today submitted a letter to Congress calling on policymakers to keep the Federal Helium Reserve operational in order to avoid a major supply crisis early next year. The letter cautions that the Bureau of Land Management will be forced to shut down the reserve as early as April of 2013, taking 30 percent of the world helium supply off the market, if Congress fails to act.

“Patients and an important manufacturing industry are facing a crisis due to helium shortages,” said Gail Rodriguez, Executive Director of MITA. “Ensuring reliable access to helium is critical in safeguarding patient access to life-saving medical imaging technologies and to the health of the U.S. economy.”

Helium is an essential component used in the creation and operation of medical imaging equipment, such as magnetic resonance (MRI) machines, which are critical to the diagnosis of stroke, aneurysms, cancers, multiple sclerosis and other deadly and debilitating diseases. Liquid helium is the only element that can feasibly cool MRI magnets to temperatures suitable for imaging; thus, MRIs in hospitals must be regularly replenished with helium in order to maintain normal operating temperatures.

“Failure to preserve our domestic helium supply will have reverberating effects for the U.S. medical imaging sector and the entire health care industry,” said Rodriguez. “MRI manufacturing facilities will have no choice but to slow or shut down production, hospitals and physicians will have to turn away patients due to the insufficient helium supply, and, ultimately, patients will simply not have access to the care they need.”

In the letter, MITA encourages Congress to take action in the next several weeks to finalize a solution to the helium crisis beyond its initial discussions in the House and Senate and the introduction of legislation like the Helium Stewardship Act of 2012 (S.2374).

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The Medical Imaging & Technology Alliance (MITA), a division of the NEMA, is the collective voice of medical imaging equipment, radiation therapy and radiopharmaceutical manufacturers, innovators and product developers. It represents companies whose sales comprise more than 90 percent of the global market for medical imaging technology. For more information, visit www.medicalimaging.org.