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August 8, 2008

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to you today about a most urgent public health and national security issue. This week the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) officially made a number of serious allegations about Dr. Bruce Ivins, a former senior scientist with the U.S. Army's Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland.

If these allegations are true, the FBI has identified serious weaknesses in the security at one of our Nation's premier laboratories for the study of some of the most deadly pathogens in the world. Their allegations also raise equally troubling security concerns about the thousands of other scientists and technicians who work at hundreds of labs across our country with "select biological agents" such as anthrax.

In light of these recent revelations, we urge you to immediately order a Government-wide investigation into the adequacy of the physical and personnel security systems in place at all Government-run or -sponsored Biosafety Level 3 and 4 laboratories (BSL 3 and 4) in the United States. In addition, until your investigation is complete and the results of that investigation are reported to you and Congress, we urge you to order the suspension of all further design and construction of such laboratories.

Biosafety Level 3 and 4 laboratories are facilities where research is conducted on highly infectious viruses and other biological agents that can cause serious injury or death. Some of the world's most exotic and dangerous diseases are handled at such facilities, including anthrax, foot and mouth disease, and the Ebola virus.

Our concern about the security at USAMRIID and other BSL 3 and 4 laboratories is neither new nor solely based upon the FBI's recent allegations. It stems in part from our Committee's year-long investigation into the risks associated with the proliferation of such laboratories since September 11, 2001. The Committee has already held two hearings on the subject on October 4, 2007, and May 22, 2008, the records of which are available on our Committee's Web site at http://energycommerce.house.gov/.

Our investigation identified serious shortcomings with the security at facilities that are run by universities and the civilian agencies of the Government, especially those run by the Science and Technology Directorate of the Department of Homeland Security, which I note with some trepidation has a new BSL 4 lab on the Ft. Detrick grounds adjacent to USAMRIID.

What we have learned so far has been frightening. We have found poor training, sloppy security, and very little, if any, oversight by the Government agencies who are supposed to be responsible for protecting our community. We also uncovered a number of serious releases of dangerous pathogens and injuries to lab workers.

Our preliminary findings indicate there appears to have been no overall planning to justify the massive increase in the construction of these labs since 2001, which was almost entirely paid for by the American taxpayer. We found that many of the labs are probably unnecessary or redundant. Shockingly, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that no one in the Government even knows the total number of BSL 3 and 4 labs currently in existence. Ironically, their proliferation has only exacerbated the potential risk of a terrorist incident or accidental release, not enhanced our Nation's security.

The bottom line, Mr. President, is that no one is in charge of all of these laboratories from a safety and security perspective. We urge you to rectify this issue in the course of your inquiry.

We plan to continue our investigation working not only with the Government Accountability Office, but also with community groups that have brought a number of serious concerns to us. In early September 2008, we expect to receive yet another report from GAO, an interim report on its assessment of physical security at the five BSL-4 laboratories currently in operation.

The Nation, however, cannot wait until our investigation is complete. Accordingly, we urge you to act now in order to ensure that USAMRIID and the other laboratories are secure. We look forward to working with you and your Administration in rectifying this serious national security threat.

Sincerely,

John D. Dingell
Chairman

Bart Stupak
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

cc: The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable John Shimkus, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations