

Chairman Dingell, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing entitled "Germs, Viruses, and Secrets: The Silent Proliferation of Bio-Research Laboratories in the United States"

Statement of Congressman John D. Dingell, Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
"GERMS, VIRUSES, AND SECRETS: THE SILENT PROLIFERATION OF BIO-RESEARCH LABORATORIES IN THE
UNITED STATES"
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing. I congratulate you for shining some much-needed light on the hidden world of bio-research, and I look forward to assisting you in this investigation as we go forward.

The central question raised by these hearings is simply this: Are these high-level biosafety laboratories safe?

The fact is that we just don't know. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), no single Federal agency even knows how many high-level biosafety labs there are or where they are, much less whether they are safe and secure. Moreover, no one Federal agency has the responsibility for tracking these labs and ensuring their safe operation.

Even though no one seems to know how many labs there are, the National Institutes of Health has energetically funded the construction of new high-containment biosafety labs all over the country, to the tune of more than \$1 billion over the past 5 years. It is unclear whether anyone has based these funding decisions on a quantifiable assessment of need. Mr. Chairman, I intend to ask GAO to review this spending, to provide an overall accounting of how much was spent, where it was spent, and on what basis.

Although we don't know how many labs there are, GAO and other witnesses will testify that the number of high-level biosafety labs has increased dramatically over the last decade. For example, at the height of the Cold War, and as little as 10 years ago, this country had only two

Level-4 laboratories—laboratories that handle deadly diseases that have no cure: one at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and one belonging to the Army at Ft. Detrick, Maryland.

By next year, there will be 12 such labs in operation. Do we really need 12 laboratories that operate at the very highest level of security? Is there a good reason for creating these labs or have we simply begun an arms race against ourselves?

I had hoped that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would be here today to assist us in answering some of these questions. I was surprised and displeased, however, to learn that even though DHS is responsible for homeland security, it declined our invitation to testify on the grounds that they were too busy and otherwise engaged.

Perhaps we need to consider compelling the attendance of the proper DHS officials at our next hearing. That would also provide DHS with an opportunity to explain their proposal to close the Plum Island Animal Disease Center off the coast of New York and move it to the mainland.

Plum Island is where the Department of Agriculture has for decades conducted research on foot-and-mouth disease. Much to their credit, they have done so safely and securely, and apparently without incident.

The DHS proposal to close Plum Island and move foot-and-mouth virus to the mainland U.S. is utterly baffling. Foot-and-mouth is one of the most contagious diseases in the world. We know from recent incidents in the U.K. that it can escape from even a high-level biosafety lab. And we know that any release of the foot-and-mouth virus could have a devastating effect on the U.S. livestock industry, just as it did in the U.K. in 2001. Why then would DHS propose to move this Level-3 biolab that works with the most dangerous animal diseases in the world from Plum Island to the heart of farm country?

I look forward to this Committee's investigation of the Plum Island issue as part of this series of hearings on biosafety laboratories.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your recognition and look forward to the testimony of the witnesses.
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