

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS HEARING ENTITLED, "GERMS, VIRUSES AND SECRETS: GOVERNMENT PLANS TO MOVE EXOTIC DISEASE RESEARCH TO THE MAINLAND UNITED STATES"

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing. Once again, I congratulate you for shining some much-needed light on the hidden world of bio-research.

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May 22, 2008

Mr.
Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing. Once again, I congratulate you for shining some much-needed light on the hidden world of bio-research. I especially look forward to shining some of that light on the bio-research activities of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) today.

As I said at our first hearing on bio-labs, the DHS proposal to close the Plum Island Animal Disease Center and move live foot-and-mouth virus to the mainland U.S. is utterly baffling. Following an extensive investigation by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Committee staff, seven months later, the DHS proposal remains most curious.

Foot-and-mouth is one of the most contagious diseases in the world. We know from recent incidents in the United Kingdom that it can escape from even a high-level biosafety lab. And we know that an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease could have a catastrophic effect on the livestock industry here in the U.S., just as it did in the U.K. in 2001. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture told the Committee staff just two days ago that an accidental outbreak in the U.S. could cause as much as \$57 billion in damages.

Equally troubling, it appears that DHS is out of step with the rest of the world. GAO investigators visited major labs across Europe and found that in other developed countries, the trend is to do just the opposite of what DHS has proposed: Germany built its new lab on an island; Denmark built its new lab on an island; and the U.K. Parliament is debating the relocation of its lab to an island.

Why

then would DHS propose to move live virus of foot-and-mouth from Plum Island to the American heartland? GAO was unable to find a scientific reason for the move. They found apparent agreement that the current Plum Island lab needs substantial renovation, but they found no justification for moving the lab to the mainland.

In

the end, DHS assures us that modern technology will make it perfectly safe to handle foot-and-mouth disease in a high tech bio-lab in the heart of livestock country. Mr. Chairman, on that score I would note that history is littered with the smoking wreckage of the impregnable, the indestructible, and the unsinkable.

Given the

potentially catastrophic effects that a release of foot-and-mouth could have on the livestock industry and the national economy, it seems to me that DHS has the burden of showing us why this is necessary and in the public interest.

In that regard, I must regrettably

point out that DHS has not been forthcoming in providing records and information requested by the Committee. In several instances, the Committee has only been provided copies of certain key records after Committee staff discovered their existence, despite the fact that we specifically requested all such records. At this late date, there are still relevant documents outstanding, including the statement of work for the environmental impact statement for Plum Island and the proposed National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF). This simply is not acceptable.

Finally, I am particularly interested

in the testimony from the ranchers who own the livestock in this country on how they view the DHS proposal. All the consultants and technical experts that DHS can hire may stand behind this idea, but it will be the farmers and ranchers who bear the risk and suffer the consequences if they are wrong.

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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