

GAO Report Finds Increased Security Controls Needed at Biosafety Level 4 Labs

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Washington, DC
– A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released today found that two of our nation’s five biosafety level (BSL) 4 laboratories are significantly lacking security controls to safeguard against unauthorized access, theft, loss or release of the world’s most dangerous biological agents and diseases. The report was requested by Reps. John D. Dingell (D-MI) and Joe Barton (R-TX), Chairman and Ranking Member of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Bart Stupak (D-MI) and John Shimkus (R-IL), Chairman and Ranking Member of its Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. The lawmakers asked GAO to perform a systematic security assessment of key perimeter security controls at the five labs. For security reasons, the names of the labs were not included in the report.

“This report confirms that we have reason to be concerned about the security of our nation’s premier labs handling some of the deadliest germs in the world,” said Dingell. “I urge the CDC to quickly identify all security shortcomings at these facilities and determine how best to rectify the problems. Six more of these high-containment labs are currently under construction. Once again, I urge the President to suspend the design and construction of these labs until we solve the security problems at the labs we already have.”

"Today's report shows a lack of minimum standards for perimeter security at research labs handling the most dangerous agents and diseases, including some that are incurable," Barton added. "No fortress is impregnable, but CDC cannot allow these biolabs to remain this vulnerable to intruders and attackers without accepting a level of risk that is intolerable."

"CDC has the responsibility to inspect and certify these labs," said Stupak. "GAO found very serious security problems at two of the five labs. Why hasn't CDC suspended the permits for those labs until they come up to standard?"

"The Biosafety Level 4 labs under CDC control should take all steps possible to prevent unauthorized access or intrusion; that is not now happening," said Shimkus. "In order to protect our citizens, we must increase security immediately at the two specific labs where security controls were lacking. Also, a specific security plan for all BSL-4 labs should be established."

BSL-4 labs conduct research on highly infectious viruses and other biological agents such as foot and mouth disease, the Ebola virus, and smallpox, which can cause serious injury or death. These labs may also handle diseases and agents for which there is no treatment or cure.

Currently, all BSL-4 labs are regulated by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, which does not mandate that the labs have specific perimeter security controls. This has resulted in significant differences in the level of perimeter security between the five labs.

GAO reviewed the site-specific risk assessments and security plans for each lab in addition to performing a physical security assessment focusing on 15 specific controls such as roving armed guard controls and magnetometers at the lab entrance. While three labs had all or most of the key security controls, two of the labs demonstrated a significant lack of controls. The labs with stronger security controls were subject to additional requirements imposed on them by agencies other than the CDC.

In order to provide assurance that each lab has a strong perimeter security system in place, the GAO recommended that the CDC Director implement specific perimeter controls for all BSL-4 labs. GAO also recommended that CDC work with the U.S. Department of

Agriculture to coordinate its efforts, given that both agencies have the authority to regulate select agents.

This GAO

report is part of an ongoing investigation by the Committee on Energy and Commerce into the risks associated with these labs as a result of their rampant proliferation in the last few years and recent security incidents. To date, the Committee has held two hearings on October 4, 2007 and May 22, 2008 to examine the safety and security of BSL labs.

In

August 2008, the lawmakers also urged President Bush to immediately initiate his own investigation into allegations about personnel security at the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases as well as all other biosafety level 3 and 4 labs operated or funded by the federal government. They specifically urged the President to issue a government wide moratorium on the construction of any new level 3 and 4 labs until such a review is completed and its results provided to the appropriate congressional committees.

For more information about the Committee investigation or the hearings visit [click here](#).

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Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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