

Dingell, Stupak Announce Hearing on Biosafety Labs; Committee to Examine Risks Associated with Labs

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NEWS RELEASE

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman

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Committee to Examine Risks Associated with Labs

Washington, D.C. — Reps. John D. Dingell (D-MI), Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Bart Stupak (D-MI), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, today announced plans to hold a hearing in early October to examine the risks associated with the recent proliferation of biosafety level III and IV laboratories in the United States.

Biosafety level III and IV laboratories (BSL III and IV) 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 BSL III or IV facilities, including foot-and-mouth disease, Q fever, and the Ebola virus.

“It appears that there has been a surge in construction of biosafety labs over the past several years which have been financed, at least in part, with federal funds,” said Dingell. “Yet, little information is available about the number of labs being operated in the U.S. and whether they are safely run. While the research conducted at these labs is certainly valuable, we must make sure that it does not pose a risk to the public health.”

The risk of infection by dangerous biological agents, even those contained in a laboratory, is real whether the cause is accidental or intentional. Preliminary reports indicate that the recent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom may have originated at a nearby biosafety lab. Another incident occurred a few weeks ago when three people were infected with Q fever at a biosafety lab at Texas A&M University. The anthrax attacks of 2001 that killed five people and infected 17 others in the United States remain unsolved.

“The potential human health risks involved in this kind of research dictate that we take a close look at whether these biosafety labs are being designed, constructed, and operated safely,” said Stupak. “Is there a point at which there are so many labs doing this research that you actually increase the chances of a catastrophic release of a deadly disease? We want to know the answer or whether anyone in the Administration has even seriously considered the question.”

Witnesses for the hearing will include the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and others to be announced.

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Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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