

Committee Questions Homeland Security Plans to Move Animal Disease Research Facility to U.S. Mainland

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NEWS RELEASE

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman

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Note: Release Includes Video

Washington, D.C. — At a hearing this week before the Committee on Energy and Commerce's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, key lawmakers questioned the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) proposal to close the Plum Island Animal Disease Center in Plum Island, New York, and replace the facility with a new laboratory located on the mainland U.S.

"The DHS proposal to move live foot-and-mouth virus to the mainland without fully exploring the dangers is utterly baffling," said Rep. John D. Dingell (D-MI), the Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. "Following an extensive investigation by the Government Accountability Office and the Committee staff, seven months later, the DHS proposal remains most curious."

“For more than 50 years, foot-and-mouth disease has been safely researched on Plum Island and moving it to the mainland would be a foolish tempting of fate that could cost countless farmers and ranchers their livelihoods and could cost billions of dollars should a foot-and-mouth release occur,” said Rep. Bart Stupak (D-MI), the Chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee.

Plum Island is the only facility in the United States allowed to conduct research on foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). FMD is the most highly infectious animal disease known. A 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the U.K. caused at least \$16 billion in damage, devastated the economy, and nearly brought down the Government. Experts in the U.S. estimate that a similar release in the U.S. could be even more destructive.

The Department of Homeland Security is proposing to move FMD research from its current location at Plum Island — located on an island off the tip of Long Island, New York — to the United States mainland.

During the hearing, representatives from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) testified that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has not performed the necessary steps to determine whether work on foot-and-mouth disease can be safely performed on the U.S. mainland. The GAO testimony also said that the Administration had relied on flawed research in determining that work on FMD can be performed safely on the mainland.

“We believe DHS does not have evidence to conclude that FMD work can be done safely on the U.S. mainland,” testified Nancy Kingsbury, GAO’s Managing Director of Applied Research and Methods.

The Committee also pressed the Department of Homeland Security regarding information the Department has purportedly withheld from GAO and the Committee during the course of their separate investigations.

“DHS has not been forthcoming in providing records and information requested by the Committee,” said Dingell. “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. This is simply not acceptable.”

Dingell said that the Committee would continue its investigation into DHS’s proposal and warned DHS Undersecretary Jay Cohen that if the Department did not cooperate with the Committee and supply requested records and documents, the Committee could resort to subpoenaing information.

“The Committee will not be satisfied until we and the GAO have reviewed all relevant materials withheld by the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Department of Agriculture,” Dingell said. “There is a pleasant way and an unpleasant way to work with this Committee. Either way, the Committee will obtain the information we are seeking.”

After intense questioning from Dingell, Cohen indicated that DHS would improve their cooperation with the Committee's investigation.

[Click here to see video of the exchange between Dingell and Cohen](#)

Representatives from the livestock industry also testified during the hearing, describing the catastrophic effects that an FMD outbreak would have on their industry and on the American economy as a whole.

"While there are many possible scenarios for the outbreak of animal diseases that would pose a significant economic risk to family farmers and ranchers as well as to their surrounding rural communities and their natural environments, few come close to the nightmare of an outbreak of FMD in dramatically impacting many aspects of American life," said Leroy Watson, Legislative Director for the National Grange of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry. "Containing a major outbreak would be a Herculean, if not impossible task."

[Click here to see all relevant documents to the Committee's Biosafety Level \(BSL\) 3 and 4 Laboratories investigation](#)

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Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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