

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

July 31, 2014

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Recently, there have been several highly publicized reports of federal laboratories experiencing lapses in the management of dangerous pathogens, prompting concern that these incidents may not be isolated events. For example, On June 5, 2014, staff in Atlanta laboratories at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were potentially exposed to live spores of the highly virulent Ames strain of anthrax (*Bacillus anthracis* or *B. anthracis*) when live anthrax bacteria were transferred from one containment area to another. Shortly thereafter, on July 1, 2014, at the Bethesda, Maryland, National Institutes of Health (NIH) campus, vials of potentially live smallpox (*variola*) virus were unexpectedly discovered at an FDA laboratory. In addition, the FDA found 327 vials of other pathogens undiscovered for decades. On July 11, 2014, the Director of the CDC disclosed other incidents of unauthorized transfers of select agents by the CDC, including a recent shipment of avian influenza H5N1 that was not reported to CDC leadership for several weeks.

It is vitally important to maintain biosafety and biosecurity protocols at federal laboratories that are designed to prevent unintentional exposure to pathogens or their accidental or intentional release because exposure to certain disease-causing pathogens can have serious and potentially lethal consequences for public health. Moreover, some pathogens causing foreign animal diseases in food animals can present a serious threat to the national economy and can halt or slow international trade.

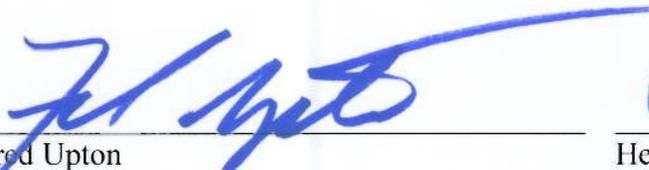
Numerous federal agencies have responsibility for overseeing laboratories that conduct research using pathogens, including the Department of Health and Human Services (which oversees NIH and CDC and other laboratories), the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Homeland Security. GAO has previously reported on several issues associated with the biosafety and biosecurity of federal laboratories that handle pathogens and on risks posed by past incidents.

In light of ongoing biosafety and biosecurity lapses at federal laboratories, we request that GAO continue its work in this area and examine the following:

1. What policies and procedures do federal agencies have to ensure the proper management of pathogens and what steps, if any, have they taken to improve their inventory management of pathogens?
2. How do these agencies evaluate the effectiveness of their policies and procedures relating to pathogen management, and what challenges, if any, do they face?

Thank you for your timely attention to this request. If you have any questions, please contact my staff, Alan Slobodin, at 202-225-2927.

Sincerely,



Fred Upton
Chairman



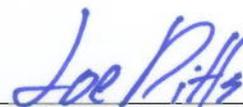
Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member



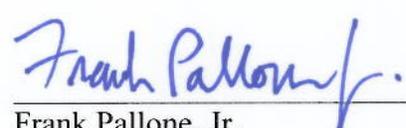
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