

**STATEMENT
OF
THE HONORABLE BART STUPAK
CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
"GERMS, VIRUSES, AND SECRETS: GOVERNMENT PLANS TO MOVE
EXOTIC DISEASE RESEARCH TO THE UNITED STATES."**

MAY 22, 2008

Good morning. This is the second in a series of hearings on bio-medical research laboratories this Subcommittee has held. The first hearing was on the proliferation of high-containment bio-labs in the United States. In future hearings, we expect to look at the proliferation of high-containment labs outside the U.S., including the role of Government funding of these labs.

Today's hearing will focus on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) proposal to close the Plum Island Animal Disease Center and build a new, much larger high-containment lab, which DHS calls the National Bio and Agro Defense Facility, or NBAF.

For 50 years, the Plum Island laboratory was owned and operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and was this country's leading foreign animal disease research laboratory. In June 2003, operational responsibility for Plum Island was transferred to DHS under the Homeland Security Act, while the research staff continued to be employed by USDA. The majority of research carried out at Plum Island is concentrated on foot-and-mouth disease, which is very highly contagious.

The Plum Island lab was built on Plum Island in order to isolate the extraordinarily hazardous viruses and other diseases handled at the lab. The natural barrier of water surrounding the island, along with its remoteness at the far eastern end of Long Island, were seen as an effective buffer zone between Plum Island and farming activities in the rest of the country.

Now the Department of Homeland Security wants to close Plum Island and build a new facility on the mainland. This proposal is embodied in H.R. 1717, which would do three things:

- Authorize the building of the National Bio and Agro Defense Facility (NBAF), which as proposed by DHS would be the world's largest animal disease research center and include the world's largest Biosafety Level-4 laboratory (BSL-4 labs handle the most deadly diseases for which there is no cure);
- Delegate to DHS broad, new authority over animal disease research and zoonotic disease research, including their human health effects; and
- Move live virus of foot-and mouth-disease to the mainland U.S. for the first time in history.

In summary, DHS proposes to become the primary agency for animal disease research and take over zoonotic disease research which is now carried out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health.

DHS seems to have given inadequate consideration to the risks of transferring foot-and-mouth to the mainland which prompted this committee to examine this issue ourselves.

As part of this Subcommittee's investigation, we looked at prior, accidental releases of foot-and-mouth disease to see what the economic consequences might be. The 2001 outbreak in the United Kingdom (U.K.) was estimated to cost a little over \$16.3 billion, and nearly brought down their Government. One of our witnesses testifying today has estimated that a major outbreak on the mainland United States could cost as much as \$40 billion!

In 1978 there was an accidental release of foot-and-mouth from the Plum Island lab which infected animals kept on the island. Fortunately, the virus never spread any further due in part to the fact that the lab is buffered by water. In the report of investigation that followed the 1978 outbreak, the Plum Island Director at the time, Dr. Jerry Callis, concluded that the water barrier surrounding the island was instrumental in containing the spread of the disease.

What the report did not say, however, was even more significant: the Committee staff found and interviewed Dr. Callis, and he revealed that at the time of the 1978 outbreak, he and others on the staff were able to persuade the World Animal Health Organization - known as the OIE - not to issue an embargo of American meat products because foot-and-mouth had not escaped from the island. Had the OIE declared an embargo - as it would today if such an outbreak occurred on the mainland - it would have halted the export of all American meat products for at least six months and the cost to the livestock industry would have been enormous. We will be interested to hear today how DHS and USDA would seek to balance devastating consequences of this magnitude with the convenience of operating a lab on the mainland.

We will also be interested in examining the costs of the proposed NBAF. The official DHS estimate is that the NBAF will cost approximately \$450 million to build. But, the Committee staff has learned that DHS engineers have already raised that estimate to between \$600 and \$750 million. Moreover, this does not include the cost of demolition, decontamination, and environmental cleanup of the existing facility if Plum Island is abandoned.

Earlier this year, DHS assured us that they had broad support for their proposal from the private sector. To test that theory, we sent letters to more than 100 livestock associations asking their views of moving this disease to the mainland. Today we have with us representatives from some of the larger associations which responded. These are the farmers who have much to lose if something goes wrong, and I understand they have strong opinions on the subject.

Let me be clear, I do not oppose the creation of a National Bio and Agro Defense Facility (NBAF), but I DO oppose moving research of this devastating Foot and Mouth Disease to the mainland United States. For more than 50 years Foot and Mouth Disease has been researched safely 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 an FMD release occur.

I want to thank the witnesses for appearing today. I know that some of you have come a long way to testify, and I want you to know that we appreciate your taking the time to be here.