

GRANVILLE NON-VIOLENT ACTION TEAM

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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY REVEALS THAT BIO-LAB IS RISKIER AND MORE EXPENSIVE THAN HOMELAND SECURITY REPRESENTED

An ongoing Congressional investigation revealed yesterday that the Bush Administration lacks scientific basis to support its position that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) can safely relocate research on the highly contagious foot and mouth disease (FMD) from Plum Island Animal Disease Research Center to the U.S. mainland.

Dr. Nancy Kingsbury, research director for the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), challenged the administration's claims in testimony given before the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. The hearing, *Germes, Viruses, and Secrets: Government Plans to Move Exotic Disease Research to the Mainland United States*, is part of a series of hearings on the proliferation of high-containment biological research laboratories.

Dr. Kingsbury testified that DHS has neither conducted nor commissioned any studies to assess whether or not work on FMD can be safely relocated to the U.S. mainland in the proposed National Bio- and Agro- Defense Facility, or NBAF. The GAO found that DHS relied on a 2002 U.S. Department of Agriculture study that addressed a completely different question. Representative Bart Stupak, Subcommittee chair, dismissed DHS's claims that new building technologies could make the proposed NBAF safe for location on the mainland, noting that 90 percent of the 103 accidents at high-containment labs in the U.S. over the past 4 years were due to human error.

Dr. Sushil Sharma, GAO Assistant Director for Technology and Engineering, observed that other high-containment labs such as the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta were not comparable to the proposed NBAF, because the CDC does not study large animals, which shed large amounts of viral material and thus present a greater risk of a disease release. The GAO representatives also noted that the Plum Island site has helped to minimize the risk that a disease release could infect the U.S. animal population, because of the water barrier around the island, the fact that the prevailing winds blow out to sea, and the general absence of livestock operations on nearby Long Island.

Dr. Kingsbury also informed the Subcommittee that the projected cost for the NBAF has increased and is now said to be between \$600 and \$750 million, far more than DHS's original budgeting of \$450 million. DHS recently asked the potential NBAF host states to contribute significant funds toward the NBAF's construction.

In connection with the hearings, the Subcommittee requested documents from DHS assessing the risk and benefits of locating the NBAF on the mainland and the potential environment impacts on each proposed location. DHS declined to supply the requested documents, stating that they were "proprietary". This inaction prompted a strongly worded response from Subcommittee co-chair John Dingell: "I expect better cooperation from your department, you are not giving it and it may be you can treat other committees with arrogant disregard for their request but you're sure not going to do it here. Because I'm going to see to it and I'm sure Mr. Stupak, our chairman, will see to it that we will lay subpoenas on you, so that we get your cooperation willingly or otherwise". Dingell described DHS's plans as arrogant, incompetent, baffling and dangerous.

Jay Cohen, DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology, stated that the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the NBAF will not be made available until mid-June at the earliest.