

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Tim Murphy**  
**Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**  
**Hearing on “Outbreaks, Attacks, and Accidents: Combatting Biological Threats”**  
**February 12, 2016**

*(As Prepared for Delivery)*

We are reminded, on nearly a daily basis, that there are those who seek to do us harm through a variety of means, including biological attacks. The threats from attack and disease outbreaks are growing and ever changing, and we are ill prepared to detect and respond to these threats as rapidly as needed. Put simply, we have been caught flat-footed too many times in the past. The federal government’s ambivalence towards biological threats must end.

Today, the biological threats confronting the U.S. generally fall within three distinct categories: 1. naturally-occurring 2. accidental incidents, and 3. intentional acts, which are often associated with acts of terrorism. We must be ready to guard against and respond to each of these threats.

It is easier for nation states and terrorists to obtain the resources necessary to produce biological weapons than ever before. And, given the ease with which one can obtain these resources, it is difficult for the intelligence community to collect, analyze, and produce intelligence about biological threats. The threat of a biological attack is not as remote as one would hope.

At the same time, pandemic and other highly pathogenic diseases are occurring with greater frequency and spreading more quickly throughout the world. As human populations put increasing pressure on remote areas and with ease of global travel, we will see more and more infectious diseases emerge. Since 2002, the world has seen outbreaks of SARS, Chikungunya, cholera, influenza, measles, Ebola, MERS, and now Zika.

The U.S. response to Ebola was a humbling reminder of the adage that everyone has a plan until they are punched in the face. We were not prepared for Ebola. Actions that were described with great confidence one day were likely determined to be ineffective the next. This is what shakes the public’s confidence. Instead of ensuring that the U.S. had strong, central leadership, the Administration’s answer was to appoint an Ebola czar who served for three months.

Sadly, the ad hoc approach continues. A Zika outbreak threatens the continental U.S. What the world initially thought was a mild illness could, in fact, have far greater consequences if the virus also brings increases in microcephaly, Guillain-Barre (gee-YAN-buh-RAY) Syndrome, eye disorders, and potential for later developmental problems in children. While the Administration has submitted a \$1.8 billion emergency request to combat Zika, its latest budget request continues to leave funding gaps of more than \$1.8 billion in Project Bioshield’s Special Reserve Fund and pandemic flu countermeasures.

Over the last three years, this Subcommittee has examined the impacts of and our preparedness for natural and accidental biological incidents. We have held hearings on our flawed response to the Ebola crisis, the need for better preparedness for pandemic and seasonal influenzas, the unsafe practices by the Department of Defense and the Centers for Disease Control on the handling of live anthrax, and the Department of Homeland Security’s broken BioWatch system. In the coming weeks we will examine the federal response to the Zika virus.

Each of these topics has a common denominator—the federal government was not adequately prepared. For years, we have lunged from crisis to crisis, reacting to what just occurred instead of planning for the next outbreak or attack. The Subcommittee’s oversight work has made a difference in each area, but I am very concerned that the federal government lacks an overall plan for biodefense. The time for a new approach is long past due. Instead of being reactionary, we must be proactive.

Last fall, the Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense published its “National Blueprint for Biodefense.” The Panel examined the current state of biodefense in the United States, examining issues related to prevention, deterrence, preparedness, detection, and response, to name a few. I am pleased that two very distinguished commission members, Secretary Donna Shalala and the former chairman of this Subcommittee, Congressman Jim Greenwood, are here today to speak about the important work of the Panel.

The Panel’s findings—that we are “dangerously vulnerable” to a biological event because we lack leadership and an overall strategy—are frightening. The Panel made thirty-three recommendations, many of which fall within the jurisdiction of the Energy and Commerce Committee and impact work that this Subcommittee has done and will continue to do.

The need for improved leadership echoes throughout the Panel’s report, and is unfortunately a theme we hear far too often about the federal government. Without leadership there is no coordination of biodefense research, preparedness, and other issues. Without leadership there is no strategy.

The Panel also makes a number of specific recommendations. We must improve our biosurveillance and biodetection capabilities. We need to detect pathogens in the air in hours and eventually minutes—not days. Agencies already collecting surveillance data should share it, not squirrel it away. We need a platform that allows for rapid diagnostic testing and vaccine development that can be applied not only to the diseases and pathogens we currently know about, but also to the ones we have not yet discovered.

The Energy and Commerce Committee, and this Subcommittee in particular, must take the lead in understanding and improving our biodefense capabilities.

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