

**Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Oversight & Investigations Hearing
“Challenges and Opportunities to Investigating the Origins of
Pandemics and Other Biological Events”
February 1, 2023**

Thank you, Chair Griffith, for convening this hearing about challenges and opportunities around investigating the origins of pandemics and other biological events.

And congratulations to becoming chair of this important subcommittee.

Welcome too to Rep. Castor for taking over as Ranking Member.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catastrophe for the U.S. and the world.

I think about the people who lost loved ones—many times without the chance to say goodbye....

...the first responders who worked around the clock, day and night...

... and every person who served on the front lines to provide hope and comfort in our communities.

Government-enforced lockdowns and school closures have hurt our children’s well-being—mentally, physically, and academically.

In addition, the pandemic cost the U.S. economy more than \$15 trillion dollars. Consider the hundreds of thousands of people whose businesses were shuttered... whose livelihoods were uprooted... who lost everything.

We owe it to every American to get to the bottom of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHY INVESTIGATING ORIGINS IS HARD

Investigating the origins of COVID-19 has been very difficult and challenging.

Some of the hurdles we face are because of inherent scientific challenges. For reference, it took 13 years to determine the origins of the SARS outbreak..

In addition, the Chinese government has lied to America and the global health community on information related to COVID-19.

LESSONS LEARNED

This is unacceptable. We should be able to join together in our search for the origins of the pandemic with the same bipartisan unity that an airplane crash investigation or other tragedy would receive.

The lesson learned is that we have to treat investigating the origins of pandemics as a major part of pandemic preparedness, with a single point of accountability in the federal government.

According to a paper recently released by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, “there does not appear to be a single office within the U.S. Government that owns the challenge of bioattribution.”

We need a plan. We need a point person. We need greater accountability.

E&C REPUBLICAN MEMBER REQUEST

In response to a request from E&C Republicans...

...the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted a technical assessment on the origins of pandemics.

This report examined: (1) key technologies available for pandemic investigations; (2) strengths and limitations of these tools; and (3) the cross-cutting challenges researchers face in determining a pandemic’s origin.

The GAO’s technical assessment is perhaps the first stand-alone document that addresses the issue of investigating the origins of pandemics in great detail.

The need for pandemic origins determinations have been noted in other documents, but preparation for investigating the origins of a pandemic or other serious biological events has not been treated as a major component of biodefense strategy.

GAO FINDINGS ON INVESTIGATIVE CHALLENGES

The GAO detailed the difficulties with such investigations, including:

- Lack of sufficient access to samples and genetic sequence data;
- Lack of standardized processes for submitting, accessing, and using genetic sequence data;
- Lack of experts in certain fields.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Overall, we must be united in our efforts to investigate the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future pandemics.

It is the public health question of our generation

We cannot afford to be divided. It will hurt our ability to prepare for the next pandemic, which could be more severe.

The evidence and experts tell us that the risks of pandemic are increasing for various reasons...

...such as a surge in international travel, or more development in remote areas that leads to more human interaction with animals and novel viruses.

We need to be better prepared.

Our goal is for today's hearing to inform bipartisan efforts on this Committee towards reauthorizing pandemic preparedness legislation.

I thank the witnesses for their participation, especially testifying in-person on short notice. We appreciate your cooperation.