

Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Oversight Hearing
1334 Longworth House Office Building
September 10, 2024
10:30 AM

Oversight Hearing titled *“The Fish and Wildlife Service Gone Wild: Examining Operation Long Tail Liberation”*

Questions from Rep. Gosar for Chris Abee

1. Is the U.S. currently experiencing a shortage of nonhuman primates for research?

Dr. Abee’s Response: Yes, the U.S. is currently experiencing a critical shortage of nonhuman primates for research. This shortage has worsened over the past 15 years due to two main factors: inadequate funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for domestic research resources and continued reliance on imported Long-Tailed macaques from Asian countries by pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies.

The expansion of domestic primate breeding research resources could potentially alleviate or eventually eliminate this shortage. However, this would require the development of national plans for nonhuman primate research resources by both the government and the private sector.

Several reports over the last six years have warned the NIH's Office of Research Infrastructure Programs (ORIP) about this critical shortage. Unfortunately, ORIP's response to these warnings has been inadequate.

These reports include:

- <https://orip.nih.gov/about-orip/research-highlights/nonhuman-primate-evaluation-and-analysis-part-1-analysis-future-demand-and>
- <https://orip.nih.gov/about-orip/research-highlights/nonhuman-primate-evaluation-and-analysis-part-2-report-expert-panel-forum>
- <https://orip.nih.gov/sites/default/files/NHP-Evaluation-and-Analysis-Final-Report-Revised-508.pdf>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK593002/>

These reports provide detailed information on the current situation and potential strategies to address the shortage of nonhuman primates for research in the United States.

2. You mention China in your testimony – what could be the consequences of China dominating this sector? How important is it for the US to counteract that dominance?

Dr. Abee's Response: China's potential domination of the nonhuman primate research sector poses significant risks to the United States. The U.S. dependence on China for critical medical research resources puts the country in a vulnerable position, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when China halted exports of Long-Tailed macaques essential for vaccine and medicine development. This sudden elimination of research resources threatened U.S. public health, highlighting the dangers of relying on a single foreign source for crucial materials. If the U.S. relinquishes its leadership role in biomedical research, China would likely determine global research priorities, significantly impacting future medical advancements. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's 2023 report concluded that reliance on China and other Asian countries for nonhuman primates is unsustainable and threatens U.S. medical research. Maintaining U.S. leadership in this field is crucial for national security, public health, and scientific advancement, making it essential to counteract China's dominance and ensure the continued progress and independence of U.S. medical research.

3. How prepared is the U.S. for the next pandemic?

Dr. Abee's Response: The U.S. is not adequately prepared for the next pandemic due to two critical weaknesses in national research resources for nonhuman primates. The first weakness is the inadequate support provided by the NIH's Office of Research Infrastructure Programs (ORIP). NIH grant support is crucial for developing new medicines and vaccines, as demonstrated by COVID-19 treatments. Multiple reports (2018, 2023, 2024) have highlighted the shortage of nonhuman primates, limiting research on public health threats. Despite these reports, NIH-ORIP has failed to develop an action plan to expand nonhuman primate research resources. In fact, inflation-adjusted NIH support for national primate research resources has decreased over the past 15 years. This lack of action suggests either insufficient expertise and/or interest in supporting NIH research grants that require nonhuman primates.

The second weakness facing the U.S. is pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies' reliance on Asian countries for nonhuman primates. These companies require nonhuman primates to test the safety and efficacy of new medicines, and most of these animals are imported from Asian countries. A 2023 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded that this reliance is unsustainable and threatens U.S. biomedical research. This issue could be addressed through public/private partnerships to develop domestic breeding resources, eventually eliminating dependence on Asian countries. These weaknesses significantly hinder the U.S.'s ability to respond effectively to future pandemics.

Questions from Rep. Stansbury for Dr. Chris Abee

1. Do you think it is acceptable to use wild macaques for research purposes?

Dr. Abee's Response: I do not think it is acceptable to use illegally obtained wild macaques for research purposes, nor do I recommend the use of wild-born macaques. Animals captured from the wild have unknown health histories, ages, genetic backgrounds, and social histories. This lack of background information may lead to flawed research results. Furthermore, research using wild macaques might require more animals due to variability caused by differences in ages, genetic background, and disease history. It's worth noting that if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continues to deny importation of captive-bred macaques from countries like Cambodia, it inadvertently forces researchers to rely more heavily on legally obtained wild macaques, which is not ideal for the reasons mentioned above. This situation underscores the importance of developing sustainable and ethical sources of these animals, preferable through captive breeding programs that can provide animals with known backgrounds and histories.