COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Lamar Smith, Chairman

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Statement of Chairman Lamar Smith (R-Texas)
Science of Zika: The DNA of an Epidemic

Chairman Smith: For more than a century, humans have been at war with the mosquito. In 1901, a U.S. Army physician named Walter Reed led a team in Cuba studying diseases that proved yellow fever was transmitted by mosquitos. Since that discovery, governments, scientists and individuals have pursued ways to prevent and control deadly mosquito-borne outbreaks.

From yellow fever, to dengue fever, to Nile Virus – humans are constantly under siege from new mosquito-transmitted diseases.

Today, we will examine the state of science in the most recent battle in the war against mosquito-borne disease: the Zika virus.

While for most people Zika causes only mild illness, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have found that there is a link between Zika infection during a woman's pregnancy and severe birth defects. For some adults there could also be serious neurological impacts.

Summer is coming and so are the mosquitos that spread the Zika virus. The Gulf Coast of Texas and other places has been called "ground zero" for the type of mosquito that carries Zika.

Zika infections have spread to over 60 countries and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean. We have seen local transmission of the virus in U.S. territories. In addition, over 500 people in the United States mainland have acquired the Zika virus while traveling out of the country. Over 300 of these are pregnant women.

These dangers raise serious questions about the administration's handling of travel alerts. The CDC has issued only level 2 alerts for 49 countries and territories, which advise travelers to only "practice enhanced precautions." They have not issued any level 3 warnings to "avoid nonessential travel," as they did during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in February declared Zika a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" (PHEIC).

Such declaration is reserved for a situation that is "serious, unusual or unexpected, carries implications for public health beyond the affected State's national border, and may require immediate international action."

Why has the administration not raised the travel alert level for countries with the highest number of Zika infections, such as Brazil and Colombia?

Is the administration so worried about attendance at the Olympics in Brazil this summer that they're willing to endanger American lives by not providing better warnings? At the least, pregnant women should be told to avoid nonessential travel to Brazil and Colombia. Anything less is putting political correctness ahead of the well-being of American women.

Today I hope that we can gather additional scientific information on Zika and the mosquito that spreads it. I also look forward to hearing about research on the best methods for controlling the spread of the Zika virus.

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