

Government Did not Heed Warnings on U.S. Mask Supply, D-FW8 Company Says as Virus Whistleblower Testifies

An Executive of North Richland Hills-based Prestige Ameritech told a House subpanel that America's mask supply was long 'destined for failure.'

WASHINGTON — The federal government for years failed to heed warnings that America's supply of surgical masks would be insufficient in the event of a pandemic, the executive vice president of a North Texas medical supply company testified Thursday on Capitol Hill.

Mike Bowen of North Richland Hills-based Prestige Ameritech told the health subpanel of the House Energy and Commerce Committee that America's mask supply was long "destined for failure" because production was shifted to foreign countries to save on costs.

"I call it chasing pennies to China," said Bowen, whose company is America's largest surgical mask maker. "It's cost us lives."

Bowen testified after the subpanel heard testimony from Dr. Rick Bright, a federal vaccine specialist who filed a whistleblower complaint against some officials in President Donald Trump's administration.

While Bright's claims about the U.S. Health and Human Services Department's coronavirus response were far-reaching — and disputed by agency officials — one centered on the government's inaction toward Prestige Ameritech over its concerns about N95 masks.

The former director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority lamented that the feds ignored the North Texas company's offer in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak to restart mothballed production lines and make millions more medical masks.

"From that moment, I knew we were going to have a crisis," Bright said.

Bowen on Thursday reiterated that his company has the capacity to produce millions more masks each month in the U.S., though he explained that he wanted a long-term commitment to prevent a repeat of the current crisis.

His story generally prompted bipartisan outcry about an issue that has spanned multiple White House administrations.

"If there's any bright spot in this current crisis that we're in, it may be that finally, after 13 or 14 years, we seriously move to make stuff here, be our providers for ourselves," said Rep. Michael Burgess, R-Pilot Point.

The conflict highlights, more broadly, a growing debate over America's supply chain for personal protective equipment such as surgical masks, particularly as the novel coronavirus has sparked unprecedented global demand for that safety gear.

U.S. manufacturing of those items has been offshored over the years to China and other countries, following a trend that has outraged Trump and others pushing an "America first" approach.

The setup has produced cost savings — and the benefits that come with that.

But medical supply companies that import such equipment from overseas have warned the Trump administration that tariffs on those items would make the U.S. less prepared for a pandemic.

The arrangement also means there's a built-in reliance on countries that sometimes treat the U.S. more like a foe than a friend.

"The U.S. has been and remains dangerously dependent on foreign countries for our supply of critical life-saving drugs and life-saving equipment — masks, gloves, PPE [personal protective equipment] and ventilators," said Rep. Anna Eschoo, D-Calif., who leads the House subpanel.

That conversation took second billing on Thursday to Bright's expansive critique of the Trump administration's coronavirus response.

"If we fail to develop a national coordinated response, based in science, I fear the pandemic will get far worse and be prolonged, causing unprecedented illness and fatalities," Bright said, warning that 2020 could bring the "darkest winter in modern history."

The doctor, who was recently removed as BARDA director, has emerged as a prominent figure even as Health and Human Services officials have strongly disputed the allegations outlined in his 89-page whistleblower complaint.

Trump took to Twitter on Thursday to call for Bright's firing.

"I don't know the so-called Whistleblower Rick Bright, never met him or even heard of him, but to me he is a disgruntled employee, not liked or respected by people I spoke to and who, with his attitude, should no longer be working for our government!" he wrote.

Republican lawmakers at the hearing defended the president, while accusing Democrats of politicizing the coronavirus response. Burgess questioned why Thursday's hearing was the first that the Democrat-run committee had held on the coronavirus.

"Apparently in a world without sports, this subcommittee has become political sport," said Burgess, a medical doctor who is the top Republican on the health subpanel.

Bowen, the Prestige Ameritech executive, highlighted supply chain issues that well predate the Trump administration.

He noted that until 2004, some “90% of all surgical masks worn in the U.S. were domestically made.” But then major domestic producers switched to importing masks from China and other foreign countries, creating what he called a “national security risk.”

That trend reversed a bit during the H1N1 pandemic in 2009, but there was a quick return to “cheaper foreign-made masks,” Bowen said.

Prestige Ameritech, as a result, had to lay off employees and reduce production. Bowen and other company officials have since sought allies in the federal government, finding support from Bright and the doctor’s predecessors at BARDA over the need to boost domestic supply.

But the executive said Bright and his counterparts didn’t appear to have the authority to break through. Bowen said he didn’t see evidence that “governmental silos” had been torn down to deal with national security issues.

Bright’s whistleblower complaint and testimony detailed Bowen’s more recent efforts, including the offer earlier this year to ramp up mask production.

“U.S. mask supply is at imminent risk,” Bowen wrote to Bright in late January in a series of email exchanges. “I think we’re in deep s---.”

Bowen and Bright found backup in the White House itself, with Trump trade adviser Peter Navarro sensing the urgency, they said. But Bright said he got “no response” from officials in Trump’s Health and Human Services Department.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said Thursday that Bright’s “allegations do not hold water.” Navarro recently told The Washington Post that Bowen’s company was “extremely difficult to work and communicate with,” compared with others that helped surge production.

Lawmakers in both parties tended to sympathize with Bowen’s situation, though some Republicans pressed the executive on how his initial offer to the feds was conditioned on Prestige Ameritech’s getting a government contract that could continue past the pandemic.

Bowen bristled at the questioning, explaining that he didn’t want to make the costly decision to staff up, only to have to lay people off months later.

“For somebody to say you could’ve done better, I’m offended by that,” said Bowen, who described himself as a Republican who voted for Trump but now supports former Vice President Joe Biden.

Bowen also criticized the Trump administration’s treatment of Bright, saying he was “embarrassed by how that’s been handled.”

Prestige Ameritech in April eventually signed a contract with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to produce a much smaller number of masks. In April, it also reached a deal with the state of Texas to make additional masks for use in the Lone Star State.