

Statement on the U.S. Biodefense Program from Communities Living in its Shadow

We, the undersigned, face the reality or prospect of federally-funded high containment “biodefense” labs being built and operated in our communities. We all have specific, local health, safety and environmental concerns about these labs existing in our midst. We represent citizen groups from around the U.S., united in our belief that the massive proliferation of “biodefense” laboratories creates a significant threat not just to our communities, but also to our nation, and to our world. We join Biological Weapons Convention non-proliferation experts in concluding that we risk creating a biowarfare arms race with those who do not trust and cannot verify our intentions. The proliferation of these labs makes us all less safe.

Since the August 2008 revelations about the 2001 anthrax letters originating from within the premier U.S. “biodefense” lab, it has become tragically clear that Congress must move quickly to investigate the nation’s “biodefense” programs.

We have many concerns about the proliferation of bio-safety level 3 and 4 laboratories in federal complexes, and in the hundreds of poorly regulated academic and private sector laboratories around the country.

- In each of our communities, we have found that environmental impacts and hazards associated with these labs have not been analyzed with thoroughness, clarity and scientific rigor. It is not possible to mitigate unacknowledged risks.
- Our experience is that State and local governments have not been well integrated into lab planning and operations.
- We are concerned about the threats associated with genetically modified pathogens and dual-use research.
- We are most concerned about supposedly “low-probability” but “high-consequence” accidents that could result in a public health disaster.
- Now we also know that the possibility of internal sabotage is quite real. We have been told officially that both the “weaponized” anthrax and the perpetrator of the only bio-terror attack in our history came from within the U.S. “biodefense” program.
- We are sobered by the fact that since the anthrax letter attacks, the number of workers in these labs has grown from a small number to over 16,000; laboratory space has grown tenfold.
- Numerous laboratory accidents have been reported. It is plain that many others go unreported, as demonstrated by the unreported accidents discovered by non-governmental watchdog groups.

- It has become clear that laboratory regulation and oversight are poor.
- Transparency has been lacking.
- The GAO and others, such as the Sunshine Project, report that safety programs and protocols are inadequate and have not been followed with consistency and rigor.

Since 2001, “biodefense” funding has provided a \$57 billion economic boon, much of it for the private sector. “Biodefense” programs are spread among many federal departments, but are frequently duplicative and poorly coordinated. We have seen no evidence of an integrated federal policy, still less one openly debated by Congress.

Congress must investigate current research and development priorities, funding levels and research requirements in relation to verifiable threats to human and livestock health. Our country needs a fact-based assessment of biological threats, both natural and man-made.

In 2005, more than 750 scientists, including Nobel Prize-winners, decried the diversion of funds to “biodefense” programs away from vital and pressing human health research of broad applicability.

We are aware that intense debate is taking place within the scientific community about whether or not much of the new “biodefense” research is relevant to or would be effective in protecting the population against a biological attack. At the same time, funding has been cut for local preparedness against potential natural or lab-generated outbreaks. These issues are equally present in the debates taking place about the enormous high-containment agricultural research laboratory complexes proposed for some of our communities.

The size and research agenda of the U.S. “biodefense” program has become out of control in the wake of the 2001 anthrax letters. Who decided it was an acceptable risk to genetically re-create and work with the formerly extinct 1918 flu virus, no matter how interesting that research may be? There are far too many comparable examples.

We need a national moratorium on “biodefense” research and, simultaneously, a serious and transparent reevaluation of the big picture. We need a great many more answers before our government pours yet more money into these programs and creates new public health risks and international strain.

Consistent with standard procedures for other federal science programs that pose potential threats to health and safety, we call upon our elected representatives to:

- Conduct a thorough independent investigation of the executive policies that have driven the unprecedented expansion of “biodefense” research and development since 2001; and

- Call an immediate halt to development of new “biodefense” facilities and an operational stand-down of existing programs until the many serious questions have been resolved, including those related to:
 - public safety,
 - biosafety and biosurety compliance,
 - laboratory regulation,
 - research focus,
 - select agent use and control,
 - dual-use research,
 - a right-sized program and
 - appropriate locations for high containment laboratories.

Signed September 17, 2008:

Organization	LAB
Boston Coalition to Stop the BioTerror Lab	Boston University, NEIDL; BSL-4 and BSL-3 Labs (NIH) Boston, MA
	Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University, Grafton, MA BSL-3 labs, BSL-4 ready (NIH)
Frederick Citizens for Bio-lab Safety	National Interagency Biodefense Campus, Fort Detrick; BSL-4 and BSL-3 labs (USAMRIID, DHS, NIH) Frederick, MD
Granville Non-Violent Action Team (GNAT)	NBAF, proposed site at Butner, North Carolina ; BSL-4 and BSL-3 labs (DHS)
No NBAF in Kansas	NBAF, proposed site at Manhattan, Kansas , at Kansas State University; BSL-4 and BSL-3 labs (DHS)
Mid-Missouri Branch of WILPF, (No NBAF in Columbia, MO)	University of MO, BSL-3 lab; and formerly proposed site for NBAF, Columbia, MO (NIH)
Tri-Valley Cares	BSL-3 facility at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, CA (DHS)
Labwatch - Seattle, WA	WWAMI Regional Center of Excellence for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Disease, Seattle, Washington , BSL-3 labs (NIH)