

## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **Committee on Energy and Commerce**

**Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman**

**For immediate release:** August 8, 2008

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### **Energy and Commerce Committee to Expand Investigation of Biosafety Labs to Include Fort Detrick**

#### ***Lawmakers Call on Bush to Suspend Construction of New Labs***

Washington, DC - Reps. John D. Dingell (D-MI), Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Bart Stupak (D-MI), Chairman of its Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, announced today that the Committee is expanding its investigation into the risks associated with biosafety level 3 and 4 labs to include an examination of personnel security at these labs. Among others, the Committee will specifically review personnel security at Fort Detrick, the government's biodefense lab in Maryland, which employed scientist Bruce Ivans, the main suspect in the 2001 anthrax attacks.

The lawmakers are also calling on President Bush to immediately initiate his own investigation into allegations about personnel security at the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases as well as all other biosafety level 3 and 4 labs operated or funded by the federal government. They specifically urged the President to issue a government wide moratorium on the construction of any new level 3 and 4 labs until such a review is completed and its results provided to the appropriate congressional committees.

"I'm deeply troubled by the allegations raised about security at one of our nation's premier labs handling some of the deadliest germs in the world," said Dingell. "Our nation is at serious risk if one of our government's most prominent scientists could have a decade long battle with mental illness without anyone noticing. The Committee will continue working on identifying security shortcomings at these facilities and determining how best to rectify the problems. We encourage concerned individuals, community groups and local governments around the country who have specific allegations of security breaches and safety problems to contact our staff."

Biosafety level 3 and 4 (BSL 3 & 4) labs are facilities where research is conducted on highly infectious viruses and other biological agents that can cause serious injury or death. Some of the world's most exotic and dangerous diseases are handled at such facilities, including anthrax, foot and mouth disease, and the Ebola virus. The Committee launched an inquiry into the risks associated with these labs because of their rampant proliferation in the last few years.

"We have already held two hearings on the risk associated with the proliferation of high containment (Level 3 and 4) labs including the physical and personnel security issues related to their operations," said Stupak. "What we have learned so far is troubling. We have found poor training, lax security and very little oversight and coordination by our government agencies. Perhaps most frightening is the fact that no single government agency is in charge of approving and monitoring Level 3 and 4 labs and their personnel. Nobody can tell us how many labs there are, who is working in the labs, what agents or pathogens are being worked on in the labs, and whether adequate background checks have been done on employees of the labs."

To date, the Committee has held two hearings on October 4, 2007 and May 22, 2008 (For more information about the Committee investigation or the hearings visit <http://energycommerce.house.gov/Investigations/BSLLabs.shtml>). The Committee has also requested a study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) of the safety risks associated with biosafety level 3 and 4 labs.

The full text of the letter to President Bush is below.

August 8, 2008

The President

The White House

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to you today about a most urgent public health and national security issue. This week the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) officially made a number of serious allegations about Dr. Bruce Ivins, a former senior scientist with the U.S. Army's Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland.

If these allegations are true, the FBI has identified serious weaknesses in the security at one of our Nation's premier laboratories for the study of some of the most deadly pathogens in the world. Their allegations also raise equally troubling security concerns about the thousands of other scientists and technicians who work at hundreds of labs across our country with "select biological agents" such as anthrax.

In light of these recent revelations, we urge you to immediately order a Government-wide investigation into the adequacy of the physical and personnel security systems in place at all Government-run or -sponsored Biosafety Level 3 and 4 laboratories (BSL 3 and 4) in the United States. In addition, until your investigation is complete and the results of that investigation are reported to you and Congress, we urge you to order the suspension of all further design and construction of such laboratories.

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infectious viruses and other biological agents that can cause serious injury or death. Some of the world's most exotic and dangerous diseases are handled at such facilities, including anthrax, foot and mouth disease, and the Ebola virus.

Our concern about the security at USAMRIID and other BSL 3 and 4 laboratories is neither new nor solely based upon the FBI's recent allegations. It stems in part from our Committee's year-long investigation into the risks associated with the proliferation of such laboratories since September 11, 2001. The Committee has already held two hearings on the subject on October 4, 2007, and May 22, 2008, the records of which are available on our Committee's Web site at <http://energycommerce.house.gov/>.

Our investigation identified serious shortcomings with the security at facilities that are run by universities and the civilian agencies of the Government, especially those run by the Science and Technology Directorate of the Department of Homeland Security, which I note with some trepidation has a new BSL 4 lab on the Ft. Detrick grounds adjacent to USAMRIID.

What we have learned so far has been frightening. We have found poor training, sloppy security, and very little, if any, oversight by the Government agencies who are supposed to be responsible for protecting our community. We also uncovered a number of serious releases of dangerous pathogens and injuries to lab workers.

Our preliminary findings indicate there appears to have been no overall planning to justify the massive increase in the construction of these labs since 2001, which was almost entirely paid for by the American taxpayer. We found that many of the labs are probably unnecessary or redundant. Shockingly, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that no one in the Government even knows the total number of BSL 3 and 4 labs currently in existence. Ironically, their proliferation has only exacerbated the potential risk of a terrorist incident or accidental release, not enhanced our Nation's security.

The bottom line, Mr. President, is that no one is in charge of all of these laboratories from a safety and security perspective. We urge you to rectify this issue in the course of your inquiry.

We plan to continue our investigation working not only with the Government Accountability Office, but also with community groups that have brought a number of serious concerns to us. In early

September 2008, we expect to receive yet another report from GAO, an interim report on its assessment of physical security at the five BSL-4 laboratories currently in operation.

The Nation, however, cannot wait until our investigation is complete. Accordingly, we urge you to act now in order to ensure that USAMRIID and the other laboratories are secure. We look forward to working with you and your Administration in rectifying this serious national security threat.

Sincerely,

John D. Dingell

Chairman

Bart Stupak

Chairman

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

cc: The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member

Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable John Shimkus, Ranking Member

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

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