

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“Assessing the State of Our Nation’s Biodefense”

Wednesday, October 28, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing on the state of our nation’s biodefense. I’m delighted to welcome two of my former colleagues—Joe Lieberman and Tom Ridge. They have been – and remain – two of my very favorite people in the world, and here they are side by side! My heartfelt thanks to both of you for being here and for your extraordinary and continued service to our country on the issue we’ll be discussing today and on many others, as well.

In recent years, public officials and academic experts alike have sounded the alarm about our ability to deal effectively with biological threats. Since 2000, several commissions, including the 9/11 Commission, have affirmed the danger that the release of a biological agent poses to all of us. In doing so, they’ve urged us to devote more attention and resources to detecting, preventing, and responding to such an incident.

Our experience with Ebola over the last year serves as a fresh reminder that biological threats are real. Over 11,000 people world-wide lost their lives in this recent Ebola outbreak and a number of Americans were infected with the disease. The spread of this disease—as well as the public alarm over the epidemic—demonstrate the importance of having the appropriate policies, public engagement plans, and resources in place ahead of time.

It’s important to remember, too, that biological threats don’t just have an adverse impact on our health and our homeland security. They can also dramatically impact our economy. As some of us will recall, just a few months ago, parts of our country struggled with an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian flu.

Though harmless to people so far, the virus devastated some parts of the poultry industry, leading to higher egg prices and the closure of some foreign markets for U.S. poultry products, thus adversely impacting businesses large and small.

Further complicating matters, there have also been a number of troubling incidents over the past year at federal and non-governmental labs that research infectious diseases.

The reports of deadly pathogens being mishandled or misplaced is concerning and underscores the need for more rigorous oversight both here and in the Administration.

“In the midst of these developments, a number of very smart people came together and began examining how the federal government – in conjunction with state, local, and non-governmental entities – was doing at preventing and combating potential biological hazards.

Since last year, the Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense – led by our two very able friends we have before us today – has convened several public meetings and consulted with a number of

experts. Their goal was simple – offer recommendations on how to improve our efforts and address capability gaps that had previously been overlooked.

That review, released earlier this morning, contains a number of valuable recommendations that could significantly improve our biosecurity efforts. I urge the Administration and our colleagues in Congress to give these recommendations the attention they deserve and, then, take action.

I look forward to discussing the Panel’s findings today. I’m confident that our witnesses can help Congress identify any number of common sense improvements to our nation’s biodefense systems that could be enacted with bipartisan support.

My thanks again to Senator Lieberman and Governor Ridge for being here today to discuss their work and that of the team they led. I look forward to a productive hearing – and knowing these two gentlemen well – an enjoyable one, too! To paraphrase one of our former commanders-in-chief, ‘Bring it on!’