

Chairman Johnson Opening Statement
“The Federal Perspective on the State of Our Nation’s Biodefense”

Thursday, April 14, 2016

As submitted for the record:

Today, we look forward to learning the perspective of federal agencies on the state of our nation’s biodefenses. We hope to learn how key federal agencies are fulfilling their responsibilities in this area, and what steps they are taking to improve preparedness and response.

To be fair, biodefense is an unwieldy topic. We face threats ranging from natural outbreaks of infectious diseases to accidental releases of high-risk pathogens, or purposeful, malicious attacks.

Over the last two years, our nation — and at times the entire world — has faced several major biological incidents.

Ebola certainly caught the nation off-guard. Our public health officials first told the nation that every community hospital could handle Ebola infections. Shortly thereafter, new cases were transferred to just a handful of specialized hospitals. There also were issues surrounding waste management, adequate supplies of personal protective equipment, and tracking travelers to countries in West Africa.

In terms of animal health, last spring’s spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza through the Midwest, including Wisconsin, revealed significant gaps in preparedness. There were staffing and equipment shortages, and a lack of understanding of the pathogen itself.

The Zika virus now threatens the nation. A recent study concluded that dozens of major metropolitan areas across the southern half of the United States are at moderate to high risk of susceptibility to the Zika virus.[1] As was the case with Ebola, officials have changed their tune from their initial approach. The deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently said, “Everything we know about this virus seems to be a little bit scarier than we initially thought.”

Given the serious potential consequences of exposure to the Zika virus, including the heart-breaking impact this virus is having on pregnant women and their babies, it is natural for American families to be concerned about the risks. I am supportive of moving \$510 million that was earmarked for Ebola response to Zika-related activities.

With this background, our purpose today is to examine the state of the federal government’s approach to biodefense.

In October 2015, we held a hearing to look at the findings of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Biodefense. The panel co-chairs, former Governor Tom Ridge and former Senator Joe

Lieberman, testified that the biodefense activities of the federal government lacked strategic direction and leadership, among other findings.

According to the panel's tally, our government spends about \$6 billion every year on biodefense-specific activities — a number of panel members had to compile themselves, since it is not one provided by any single agency.

We need to work together to identify and close gaps in our preparedness and response, and that is why I am pleased to have representatives of key agencies here today.

I want to thank our witnesses for joining us this morning and look forward to their testimony.