

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor

Hearing on "The Biosafety of Risky Research: Examining if Science is Outpacing Policy and Safety"

April 27, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

There are two important, complementary priorities that I look forward to discussing with our witnesses today. The first is to make sure that we're advancing science and research so that we can better protect Americans from disease, achieve scientific breakthroughs, and continue to lead the world in innovation and discovery. The second is to ensure that the safety standards governing our nation's research continue to protect the public and the scientists and researchers involved. There are extensive oversight and safety requirements that already exist in our research centers today, and I hope that our witnesses can help us better understand that.

Americans can be proud of the U.S.-led research in laboratories in the United States and across the world, including with infectious pathogens. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, we relied on this research to spur vaccine development in record time. Each year, researchers across the globe collaborate to study seasonal influenza so that we can better develop vaccines to protect the public based on real-time data in other nations. When more infectious flu variants—like avian flu—emerge, we depend on our researchers to go into high-containment labs to study ways to prevent death and disease. And, as we'll discuss at tomorrow's hearing, viral research is critical to helping us prepare for and address the emerging threat of anti-microbial resistance.

Because this research is so important, Congress should support thoughtful, constructive steps to ensure that it is being conducted safely. We must remain the gold standard of biosafety standards internationally, and continue to improve and modernize. I hope to have a constructive discussion about those potential improvements in this Committee and ensure that any new policies we consider include input from key stakeholders in the research community.

Some of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle have floated broad bans on international collaboration without considering what that would mean for flu surveillance, vaccine development, or monitoring viruses. Many of these proposed research restrictions and criticisms target research in other countries, including in some countries where viral outbreaks have originated in the past. But disease knows no borders. Since I've come to the Congress, we have had to address global outbreaks of MERS, Ebola, Zika, and, of course, the COVID-19 and its changing variants. These viruses are threats to everyone, and it is critical that our scientists can partner with public health experts to identify and stop potential pandemics. The Administration's National Biodefense Strategy recognizes the need for America to galvanize support for

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multinational biosafety commitments, so that research in foreign countries can be done safely and up to the same high standards we use in labs at home.

I also sit on the Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, where we are focused on the threat posed by the CCP and on a plan of action to defend the American people, our economy, and our values. I can tell you that if America does not lead the world in infectious disease research, the CCP certainly will. If we don't continue to engage and collaborate with the international research community, advise where appropriate on development of labs, and export our best practices and training on lab safety, the CCP will fill that void. And if they do, we will have little transparency into what work is being done and how.

Overbroad funding bans will not accomplish our goals and could have detrimental impacts on future medical advancements and scientific breakthroughs. Any discussions we have must be done in a thoughtful manner with the input of the people who actually conduct research on dangerous pathogens every day.

No one has a greater stake in lab safety than researchers working in America's labs. These are the people who do the hard work to develop ground-breaking proposals, study how viruses grow and mutate, and make sure we are protected from the next viral outbreak.

I trust that we can support these researchers by forging a bipartisan path forward on lab safety that doesn't stifle the research and international collaboration that all Americans rely on to protect their health and safety.

I look forward to the discussion today and I yield back.