

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

Hearing on “Challenges and Opportunities to Investigating the Origins of Pandemics and Other Biological Events”

February 1, 2023

I am pleased to be here as Ranking Member for the Oversight and Investigation Subcommittee’s first hearing of the 118th Congress. This Committee’s jurisdiction touches on so many critical issues that affect everyday lives of our neighbors, from their ability to access life-saving health care to ensuring that we provide clean energy solutions that lower costs for consumers and help make for a more livable planet.

We have the ability in this Subcommittee to ensure that our policies are carried out in a way that helps Americans in the way we intended. And when we shine a light on challenges and shortcomings, we should work together on solutions that will improve our government’s ability to help our neighbors back home.

Today’s hearing addresses one component of our evolving ability to respond to a pandemic: identifying a pandemic’s origin.

Understanding the origin of a pandemic can be useful to inform the necessary public health response. For example, if a virus is found to have jumped from a particular species of animal to humans, we can take steps to better monitor that species of animal and improve any necessary handling procedures to mitigate future risk.

Pinpointing the origin of a disease is a piece of information that can be used in developing public health policies and for conducting further research, but it must be accompanied by informed leadership that supports good science, listens to experts, and rallies the public to act together for the common good—including, for example, encouraging the use of safe and effective vaccines. Putting this information into action requires that government officials, especially our leaders at the state and federal level, take seriously the threat that a pandemic poses.

I appreciate the work that the Government Accountability Office put into the report at the center of today’s hearing. There is a lot in here to unpack, and I look forward to doing that with this panel of witnesses. The report makes some sensible policy recommendations that could contribute to a stronger national public health system—increasing collaboration across borders, developing new technologies for researchers, standardizing and improving transparency in collected data, and strengthening our scientific workforce. I hope we can have a continuing discussion in this Committee and Subcommittee on how we can work toward all those goals.

I do have to mention that this hearing was sprung on us with short notice—before the Committee was even formally organized. I will let others judge whether there really is a good cause that warrants an exception to the notice requirement here, but either way it does limit the ability for members and witnesses to prepare themselves on complicated topics.

In her remarks at the Committee organizing meeting yesterday, Chair Rodgers mentioned the importance of trust in doing the work that we do. I agree with that sentiment. And I trust that going forward, for the sake of constructive oversight work, we can ensure that members, staff, and witnesses have the lead time necessary to tackle the complex issues that come before this Subcommittee, as we have done in the past.

I want to close my remarks by noting that in December, before the 118th Congress even began, then-incoming chairs of two other Committees sent the administration excessive document demands and a laundry list of dozens of public servants at our health agencies who they sought to interview in a witch-hunt over the origin of the current pandemic.

That generates the exact kind of hostility and fear in the scientific community that the GAO report warns about, stating that “Researchers may experience unwanted attention, pressure, harassment, or influence because of their involvement in pandemic origin investigations” and that experienced researchers may refuse to participate in such investigations as a result. Democrats will not ignore bad-faith efforts to erode trust in science or impede the work of scientists defending the health and safety of the American people.

I appreciate, Chair Rodgers and Chairman Griffith, that this Subcommittee has begun its work in a different manner by bringing in serious witnesses to navigate today’s challenging topic. And I truly hope that as we continue the Committee’s important oversight work in this area and in others that we do so in that same spirit.

January 31, 2023

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