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ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115
Majority (202) 225-3641
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May 1, 2023

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) assess the benefits and risks of conducting predictive field research programs for viruses.

Because pandemics incur large social and economic costs, the ability to predict which viruses might lead to a pandemic would be useful for preparation. Researchers use a variety of approaches in their efforts to predict and effectively prepare for and respond to infectious disease outbreaks. Such approaches include collection and studies of viruses that may have the potential to cause pandemics.

Reports indicate that a large portion—estimated around 75 percent—of emerging infectious diseases come from nonhuman animals. To study these viruses, field work is often conducted in remote areas to collect viruses that can then be catalogued and characterized using scientific techniques such as sequencing and culturing. For example, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) former PREDICT program and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) supported the collection of samples from wildlife (e.g., bats) and the environment to identify and characterize unknown or novel viruses with the potential to infect humans.[1] By collecting, identifying, and characterizing these viruses, researchers hope to improve their ability to predict which viruses or virus characteristics might cause a pandemic. This field work into microbial research also leads to continued studies into bacteriophage (phage) research.

[1]For example, from 2009 to 2019, the PREDICT program identified nearly 1,000 new viruses; however, its funding was cut in 2020.

However, while these predictive types of programs, such as at the NIH and USAID, have collected and identified thousands of new viruses from all over the world, their benefit to preventing pandemics is uncertain. For example, some researchers have questioned whether collecting and characterizing viruses found in animals can accurately predict those that may infect humans, or what the effect would be if and when humans are subsequently infected. Others have suggested these types of programs risk unintentional infection of field or laboratory researchers that could result in an accidental outbreak.

To support this assessment, we are requesting that GAO conduct a scientific audit to address the following questions:

1. What is known about whether field-based collection of virus samples from wildlife and the environment improves our ability to predict, prevent, and respond to pandemics?
    a. What federal programs across the U.S. Government support or conduct field-based virus collection from wildlife and the environment?
    b. What activities do researchers perform during field-based sample collection, transport, and laboratory characterization in order to identify viruses with pandemic potential?
    c. What are the reported outcomes of these programs?
        i. How are these outcomes reported, and to whom?
        ii. What is the required timeline for reporting?
        iii. Specifically, do they improve our ability to predict pandemics?

2. What are the risks and limitations of field-based collection of virus samples?
    a. Have any of these activities resulted in the infection of research personnel or the spread of pathogens in a larger geographic area?
    b. What current regulations, policies, procedures, or other oversight govern field-based collection of virus samples to help mitigate the risks of these activities?
    c. How are unintentional outbreaks and accidental exposures reported and to whom?
    d. What is the required timeline for reporting?

3. What approaches other than field collection of viruses may help predict future viral outbreaks, and what is known about the benefits and risks of such approaches compared to field collection?

If you have any questions, please contact Alan Slobodin or John Strom of the Majority Committee staff at (202) 225-3641. Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chair
Energy and Commerce Committee

Brett Guthrie
Chair
Subcommittee on Health

H. Morgan Griffith
Chair
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

cc: Frank Pallone Jr., Ranking Member, Energy and Commerce Committee
Anna Eshoo, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Health
Kathy Castor, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations