

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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June 3, 2021

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

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic is among the deadliest infectious diseases to have emerged in recent history, but the specific mechanism of its emergence in humans remains unknown. The World Health Organization (WHO) released its global study of the origins of the COVID-19 virus on March 30, 2021.¹ However, the WHO Director-General stated after the publication of the report that the conclusion that a lab leak is extremely unlikely has been too hastily made in the report and requires further investigation.² We believe much remains to be done to better establish the origination of the virus—knowledge that will help to prevent future pandemics.

In the aftermath of the 2001 anthrax attacks in the U.S., GAO found that the scientific tools for forensic attribution of biological attacks were not validated and technologies were not immediately available to detect forensic signatures that would have allowed identification of the

¹ WHO-convened Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part Joint WHO-China Study 14 January-10 February 2021 Joint Report (March 30, 2021), *available at* <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus/origins-of-the-virus>

² WHO Director-General's remarks at the Member State Briefing on the report of the international team studying the origins of SARS-CoV-2 (March 30, 2021), *available at* <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-remarks-at-the-member-state-briefing-on-the-report-of-the-international-team-studying-the-origins-of-sars-cov-2>

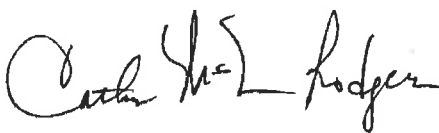
source.³ In a recent study, GAO similarly assessed the capabilities of currently available technologies being used for forensic attribution of a chemical attack.⁴

In an effort to create a faster and more transparent system for identifying and monitoring future disease outbreaks and be better prepared to predict, prevent, detect, assess and effectively respond to pandemics in a highly coordinated fashion, we ask that GAO conduct a technology assessment to address the following questions:

1. What technologies or approaches are currently being used for the identification and forensic attribution of a pandemic microbial strain, and what are their strengths and limitations?
2. To what extent can these technologies or approaches determine whether a pandemic microbial strain originated from a laboratory, is naturally occurring, or was engineered?
3. What current or emerging technologies could be used to increase phylogenetic understanding of microbial strains and potentially estimate the time to the most recent common ancestor?
4. What challenges, including scientific and research gaps, exist in attributing pandemic microbial strains to their sources, and what policy options might help address these challenges?

If you have any questions, please contact Alan Slobodin or Diane Cutler of the Minority Committee staff. Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Republican Leader
Committee on Energy and Commerce



H. Morgan Griffith
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations

³ GAO, *Anthrax Detection: Agencies Need to Validate Sampling Activities in Order to Increase Confidence in Negative Results*, GAO-05-251 (March 2005). GAO, *Anthrax: Agency Approaches to Validation and Statistical Analyses Could Be Improved* GAO-15-80 (December 2014).

⁴ GAO, *Science & Tech Spotlight: Tracing the Source of Chemical Weapons*, GAO-21-271SP (December 21, 2020).



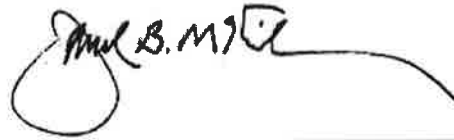
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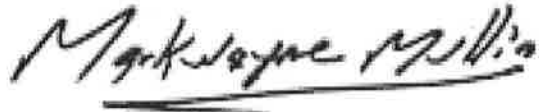
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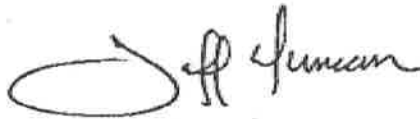
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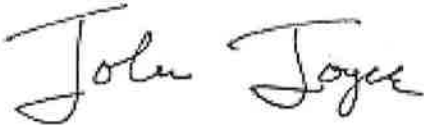
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CC: The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chairman
The Honorable Anna Eshoo, Chair, Subcommittee on Health
The Honorable Diana DeGette, Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations