



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

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Hearing Statement of Emergency Management & Technology Subcommittee Ranking Member Tim Kennedy (D-NY)

Surveying the Threat of Agroterrorism: Perspectives on Food, Agriculture, and Veterinary Defense

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One of the problems identified in the aftermath of September 11th was our country's failure to imagine the absolute worst-case scenarios. In recognizing those gaps in our national security, the Department of Homeland Security was created the following year, and Congress invested in first responder resources to strengthen communities' ability to counter all types of threats and hazards.

In fact, as a direct effect of the 9/11 attacks, Congress and the George W. Bush administration recognized the need to improve the United States' preparedness towards agroterrorism and biosecurity more broadly. This included designating agriculture as a critical infrastructure sector and passing legislation in 2002 to implement a coordinated, whole-of-government strategy for bioterrorism preparedness.

Since then, over the last two decades, the federal government has worked closely with farmers, private sector partners, animal and plant experts, and academia to ensure that we have strong infrastructure in place to detect and defend against any biosecurity threats.

In fact, in my home state of New York, Cornell University hosts the Animal Health Diagnostic Center, a Level 1 facility that is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Animal Health Laboratory Network. Their work involves receiving specimens from livestock and testing them for infectious diseases that could have a devastating impact on animal agriculture and, subsequently, our national economy. Unfortunately, in the last week, Cornell's lab received notice that two funding agreements they were set to receive from the USDA have been paused. If Cornell's role in the national lab network is diminished, the entire biosecurity surveillance system becomes weaker, meaning there is a lower capacity nationwide to respond quickly if we were to experience an agroterrorism event.

There is a risk that terrorist groups could develop agro and biological weapons in isolation or may even receive help from our foreign adversaries, like North Korea, China, Iran, or Russia, with biological weapons programs. Cornell's lab hosts the infrastructure that would help counter a threat like this, and losing a link in the USDA's surveillance network due to withheld funding would severely cripple our ability to respond to an act of agroterrorism such as this.

More broadly, a weakening of federal infrastructure is a trend we are seeing across the counterterrorism and public health sector, undermining the very lessons learned from September 11th. Just last month, the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced \$134 million in cuts to counterterrorism funding from cities that have repeatedly been identified as top targets for terrorists.

New York City, the site of the deadliest terrorist attack to hit our nation, will have to weather a cut of \$64 million this year alone. Importantly, these grants support the first responders who encounter threats from today's hearing subject, agroterrorism.

The Trump administration's counterterrorism funding cuts to New York City, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Jersey City, and San Francisco should be cause for bipartisan concern, and I hope the majority will hold a hearing on the impacts of funding losses in places targeted by terrorists.

Since taking office, the Trump administration has also dismantled some of the institutions that would lead a robust public health response to an agro or bioterrorism attack. This administration has fired the head of the Centers for Disease Control, failed to appoint permanent leadership to the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response, and to FEMA.

The administration has canceled hundreds of millions of dollars for vaccine development and fired federal employees, including scientists and researchers, who would support a mass public health response to emerging zoonotic diseases, such as avian flu. These federal agencies, all of which are leaderless, would have a primary role in a mass agro or bioterrorism catastrophe.

I am incredibly concerned that America is not prepared to respond to a serious biological threat. We are walking straight into a scenario where we know the risks but are completely hamstrung in addressing them, not just today but in the years to come. I hope today's conversation is useful and informative, and I want to thank the witnesses for participating in today's hearing.

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