

NEWS ALERT



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Homeland Security Committee

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Ranking Member



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

Full Committee Markup

November 4, 2015 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee markup:

“Today, the Committee will be considering seven measures that address a broad array of homeland security priorities. Yesterday, the Committee heard from the co-chairs of the “Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense.” At the hearing, we drilled down on biodefense, one key element of a major homeland security challenge—securing our Nation from Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosives risks.

Detecting, mitigating, and responding to such risks is a shared responsibility. At the local level, there are the “boots on the ground” or first responders who would be called to respond in the event of a CBRNE attack in their community.

I am pleased that today we will be considering the FRIENDS Act, as introduced by the gentlelady from Texas, Ms. Jackson Lee, to enhance our understanding of how to support our first responders.

At the Federal level, it falls to men and women at the Department of Homeland Security to undertake a range of activities from developing and maintaining the Global Nuclear Detection Architecture to administering bio-surveillance programs to implementing the National Policy for Countering Improvised Explosives Devices.

Today, we will be considering legislation, introduced by Chairman McCaul, to change how DHS organizes itself to carry out its CBRNE activities. H.R. 3875 does not seek to fundamentally alter DHS’ responsibilities with respect to CBRNE risks. Rather, it alters how the men and women who are charged with addressing these risks are organized.

When the Department floated the idea, in June, of folding the Office of Health Affairs and the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office into a new office, details were scant. It was presented as a move in furtherance of interagency coordination, consistent with the Secretary’s “Unity of Effort” campaign.

I have been skeptical of the proposal, as it would result in upheaval for some of the greatest scientific minds within the Department at a time when the Nation is at a heightened threat level. In our subsequent discussions with the Department, we learned that cost savings are not anticipated from this reorganization.

Further, not once did the Department say that this reorganization was necessary to make the troubled BioWatch program or the long-suffering National Biosurveillance Integration Center effective.

Mr. Chairman, on the heels of the issuance of the Department's June report, the Government Accountability Office commenced a comprehensive evaluation of DHS' proposal. For the record, GAO commenced this work at my request, a request I submitted two years ago but that GAO could not begin because the Department stalled on issuing a report.

I have made no secret of the fact that I believe that the Department, and for that matter, this Committee would benefit from waiting until we hear from GAO before moving legislation to establishing a new office. While I am disappointed that the Committee is proceeding without GAO's full assessment of DHS' proposal, I am heartened by the Chairman's willingness to work with me to make refinements to the bill to address some of my concerns.

Mr. Chairman, while I have my doubts about moving forward on H.R. 3875 today, I am pleased that a timely cybersecurity bill, introduced by the gentlelady from California, Ms. Torres, is being considered.

H.R. 3878, the "Strengthening Cybersecurity Information Sharing and Coordination in Our Ports Act of 2015," reflects the oversight findings of the Border and Maritime Security Subcommittee regarding cyber vulnerabilities at our Nation's ports and builds on this Committee's record of leadership with respect to cybersecurity.

Finally, I am pleased that the Committee is considering another timely measure—H.R. 2285, the "Prevent Trafficking in Cultural Property Act." I commend the gentleman from Massachusetts, Mr. Keating, for bringing to this Committee's attention the need for DHS to enhance its ability to identify and investigate the trafficking of cultural property. ISIL, in particular, has been very public in its looting of archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria and is known to be stockpiling cultural objects for future sale on the international market.

DHS must be ready to do its part to thwart such activity which not only robs the populations that are the primary victims of ISIL's ruthless campaign of their cultural treasures but also funds terrorism. I am pleased that the Committee is also considering legislation today to clean up antiquated language in the Homeland Security Act, authorize the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, and provide cyber support to State and local governments."

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For press inquiries, please contact Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
H2-117, Ford House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515
Phone: (202) 226-2616 | Fax: (202) 226-4499
<http://chsdemocrats.house.gov>
[@homelanddems](https://twitter.com/homelanddems)