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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

Food for Thought: Efforts to Defend the Nation's Agriculture and Food

February 26, 2016 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications subcommittee hearing entitled "Food for Thought: Efforts to Defend the Nation's Agriculture and Food":

"Before we begin, I would like to thank all of the witnesses for being here today, especially Professor Brian Williams from Mississippi State University. Mr. Williams is a professor at Mississippi State's College of Agriculture Economics and will provide important insight into the economic effects of an agro-event – whether man-made or naturally occurring. I would like to thank him for making the trip to Washington to share his important insights with us today. I represent a district in Mississippi where agriculture is the number one source of income.

From catfish and poultry to hogs and rice, agriculture accounts for $10.6 billion in annual revenue - or over 15 percent - of the State's income. Any significant disruption to the agriculture industry there – whether at the hands of terrorist actors, emerging diseases, or natural disasters – would have devastating rippling effects throughout the State and the Nation. That is why I have worked hard to advance programs that improve the national capability to prevent - and mitigate the impact of - biological events affecting agriculture and improve resiliency within the industry.

I am interested in hearing our witness' assessment of Federal efforts to protect the nation's food supply and to better understand the risks to our agriculture sector. Late last year, the Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense released a report that identified capability gaps across the national biodefense enterprise. The Panel's report focused on biodefense efforts associated with protecting human health. It also addressed bio-threats to agriculture.

An important recommendation from the report called for enhanced surveillance and detection of biological threats to animal health. This would be achieved through the establishment of a "nationally notifiable animal disease system" modeled after the existing system for identifying human disease outbreaks.

Too often, we find that information sharing does not take place across units of government and the private sector. Hopefully, our witnesses can shed light on whether the Federal government is doing enough to identify international threats to the agriculture industry. I believe these actions must be timely and fact-based to protect domestic livestock and crops. Domestically, we should examine whether animal disease reporting requirements ensure that emerging diseases are identified. That information is central to the ability of health and safety officials to contain an outbreak.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed the creation of a National List of Reportable Animal Diseases. I would be interested to hear whether the existence of such a list would be helpful to agricultural stakeholders and whether it could be designed in a way where States and other owners of disease information could willingly and comfortably report disease incidence?

Moreover, I want to understand the extent to which the agriculture industry has been included in emergency planning activities so that it is resilient in the wake of a natural disaster. Now that NBAF has received its construction funding, I want to learn about the research that will be conducted on biological threats to livestock and animal diseases that can impact human health. To that end, I would like to learn more about Kansas State's partnership with NBAF, the research that will be pursued, and how its work will advance national agro-defense capabilities."

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FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978