

Citizens Education Project, Salt Lake City, UT
Coalition for a Safe Lab, Hamilton, MT
Los Alamos Study Group, Santa Fe, NM
Nuclear Watch of New Mexico, Santa Fe

Physicians for Social Responsibility, SF-Bay Area CA
The Sunshine Project, Austin, TX
Tri-Valley CAREs, Livermore, CA
Western States Legal Foundation, Oakland, CA

Non-Profit Coalition Calls for a National Reassessment of the Biodefense Building Boom

(October 14) - A non-profit coalition is calling upon Congress and the public for an urgent national reassessment of America's biodefense spending. The coalition contends that the \$6 billion in biodefense that Congress hastily appropriated after last fall's anthrax attacks have triggered a laboratory rat race more likely to undermine US national and environmental security than to enhance it.

The groups dedicated to research safety, arms control, and scientific responsibility do not oppose all biodefense work; but cite a range of concerns and evidence in support of their demands (see attached quotes and contact sheet). The Coalition says that unless a national reconsideration is done, competition for biodefense funding and poor planning will combine with dangerous results, including a needless proliferation of facilities handling biowarfare agents and a spread of the knowledge needed to wage biowarfare. This poses dangers to local communities, to arms control, and US national security, they claim. Instead of emphasizing biotech band aids from facilities pursuing dream vaccines and working in secret, the coalition says spending should focus on unclassified, public research to bolster local public health capabilities.

"The number of new biodefense biosafety level 3 and 4 laboratories being developed far exceeds what is prudent and necessary, and we are asking Congress to freeze biodefense laboratory construction until a cross-cutting federal review ensures that the massive new investment isn't going awry, and wouldn't be better spent elsewhere," said Steve Erickson of the Citizen's Education Project in Salt Lake City. According to Edward Hammond of the Austin, TX-based Sunshine Project, *"Government and academic labs are responding less to bona fide needs than the urge to build power and revenue centers for what they hope is a perpetual biodefense boom. This will result in a dangerous proliferation of bioweapons agents and the knowledge to use them."*

"Too many agencies want too many facilities, likely leading to duplication and unnecessary danger," Colin King of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico in Santa Fe, *"Agencies are confusing the public by trying to gain lab approval on a one-by-one basis, obfuscating the risks and ramifications of large national programs."*

The coalition is calling for programmatic environmental impact assessments and insists that Congress and the General Accounting Office carefully examine the programs of the National Institutes of Health and the Departments of Defense, Energy, and Agriculture both individually and for their collective implications. *"Congress and the GAO need to identify the pork, the overlap, the national and local dangers, and address the bigger question of whether the proposed construction of more than a dozen new (or upgraded) biodefense labs really serves America's domestic and international interests"* argues Tara Dorabji of TriValley CAREs in Livermore, CA.

The coalition is currently working on biodefense lab and program expansions proposed at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, Utah State University and Dugway Proving Ground in Utah, Rocky Mountain Laboratory in Montana, and the University of Texas in Galveston. Other new and upgraded BL3 and 4 labs are proposed in San Antonio and Lubbock, TX, Manhattan, KS, Albuquerque, NM, Davis, CA, Honolulu, HI, and Plum Island, NY. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), part of NIH, is promising up to a dozen "Centers of Biodefense Excellence", each with BL3 and/or 4 capacity.

Additional Information, Contacts, Quotes

The coalition members are Citizen's Education Project (Salt Lake City, UT), Coalition for a Safe Lab (Hamilton, MT), Los Alamos Study Group (Santa Fe, NM), Nuclear Watch of New Mexico (Santa Fe), The Sunshine Project (Austin, TX), Tri-Valley CAREs (Livermore, CA) and Western States Legal Foundation (Oakland, CA). Members cite a range of concerns and evidence in support of their demands, including:

Domestic Threat: The FBI's investigation of last fall's anthrax letters has determined that the attack was perpetrated with a US biodefense anthrax strain, and suggests that the author of the attacks was a biodefense insider with hands-on training courtesy of the federal government. Under current plans, thousands of new people will gain access to bioweapons agents and knowledge of their preparation and use. How is the government making sure that it isn't sowing the seeds of domestic terrorism?

Manipulation of the Facts: In California, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) wants a new biodefense lab smack dab in the middle of a major nuclear weapons design facility, and right next door to a bioreactor (fermenter) facility potentially capable of producing agents on a massive scale. These issues were brushed aside in the lab's draft environmental impact assessment. LLNL claims it needs the new facility because it has insufficient access to similar labs nearby and because the Department of Energy has no BL3 capacity. *"LLNL is manipulating the truth to its convenience."* says Tara Dorabji of Livermore-based Tri-Valley CAREs, *"First, LLNL's environmental assessment fails to give due consideration to the civilian-mission BL3 facilities already in existence. Second, LLNL conveniently ignores the fact that DOE also wants to build a BL3 facility at the Los Alamos Lab in New Mexico. And, finally, new information has surfaced showing LLNL involvement in a proposal to build BL4 and BL3 labs in nearby Davis, California."*

Opaque Proposals: In Utah, the US Army's Dugway Proving Ground wants a 200% increase in its biodefense activity, including BL3 lab upgrades and another aerosol chamber, a very controversial piece of testing equipment with many potential offensive uses. The Army has produced a huge draft environmental impact assessment (DEIS); but according to Steve Erickson of the Citizens Education Project in Salt Lake City, *"The DEIS is 1000 pages long, but it's so vague that it's impossible to fairly assess what the Army wants to do. They want to conduct many more in-lab and open-air tests, but won't say with what and when or under what conditions until future plans and studies are completed and rubber-stamped by the brass. There is no independent oversight of this facility, and given its penchant for secrecy and its track record of exposing civilians and contaminating the environment with its biological, chemical, and radiological tests, Dugway can't be trusted with such blanket permission to expand programs and missions."*

Poor Community Consultation: In Hamilton, Montana, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) wants to build a new BL4 facility at Rocky Mountain Labs (RML). NIH originally proposed to begin building in February 2003 with only a brief environmental assessment and a two week public comment period. Hamilton's Coalition for a Safe Lab demanded more public participation and a more thorough review of the project. NIH relented and is now conducting an Environmental Impact Statement, which will delay groundbreaking. Then, RML put together a community outreach committee; but decided the meetings would be by invitation only. The Coalition protested again. At the last minute, RML opened the meetings to the public; but still required interested people to call ahead and advise the lab that they would like to attend.

Coalition for a Safe Lab organizer Mary Wulff, says, *"When we arrived for their meeting we were welcomed with the news that we needed a security escort to use the restroom. The meeting was scheduled for 2 hours. During that time we listened to NIH talk about public relations with their community, children's programs, and bus rides across the NIH campus. Ten minutes were left for our twenty community 'leaders' to comment and ask questions. Several of them didn't comment at all. Our Coalition previously presented RML with a comprehensive list of questions, which they have not yet answered. RML's assistant director said at the meeting that they definitely will not be working with smallpox or Ebola; but conflicting information was given to a Coalition by RML's biosafety committee*

chairman. The chairman said that if the world situation changes then 'all bets are off'. It's unfair to thrust a national facility like this on a small community, especially in the absence of a comprehensive national review."

Ephemeral Promises? In Galveston, Texas, the University of Texas (UT) is building a new BL4 lab. UT claims good community relations for the effort, which began before September 11th, 2001. UT held public meetings and in July 2001, dispelled criticism that the lab's work might be "secret or ominous" with the public declaration that "No classified research will be performed." In September 2002, the Austin-based Sunshine Project wrote the lab's Director to verify that the University of Texas stands by its no secrets pledge, and to request the lab's biosafety committee transparency rules. The BL4 that prides itself on community relations did not reply.

Dangerous Relationships with Weaponsmaking: In New Mexico, a number of non-profit organizations are asking tough questions of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), which wants to build a new BL3 facility. Greg Mello of Los Alamos Study Group in Santa Fe says "*Does it really make sense to put a biodefense lab at the nation's largest facility for designing, testing, and producing weapons of mass destruction? Los Alamos has little conspicuous expertise in biology, but it does have a 60-year history of secrecy and compartmentalization devoted to weapons development. What is the rest of the world going to think? What should they think? Los Alamos is not inspectable. A decision to build a bioweapons 'defense' facility at such a place could cripple efforts to build a better nonproliferation regime for biological weapons.*"

New Mexico non-profits are fed up with LANL's dismal environmental and safety compliance. In August, Nuclear Watch of New Mexico filed suit in federal court, arguing that LANL and DOE have failed to take the hard look at their bioweapons research program that is required under federal law. "*We hope to compel DOE to undergo a Los Alamos-specific Environmental Impact Statement, and a Programmatic EIS for the Chemical and Biological National Security Program. If we are successful, this will greatly increase public scrutiny of DOE's program, and make it more difficult for the agency to continue to avoid environmental and public health issues,*" said Nuclear Watch's Colin King.

Misplaced Priorities: The coalition sees overinvestment in high-tech facilities to handle pathogens as the wrong emphasis for protecting the public against biological agents – whether naturally-arising or intentionally introduced by terrorists. Dr. Robert M. Gould, President of the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility states "*We need to develop a comprehensive, primary-prevention approach towards all forms of infectious disease, which means providing adequate resources to combat AIDS, antibiotic-resistant tuberculosis, as well as the rise in diseases such as malaria predicted to increase from global climate change. According to a UN report from 2000, \$10 billion a year would provide enough clean water and sanitation to cut by up to one third the 4 billion cases of diarrheal disease that kill 2 million people every year.*"

International Ramifications: According to the coalition, the emphasis on labs doing work such as aerosol challenge tests, particularly by the Defense and Energy Departments, runs terrible risks of being misinterpreted by other countries and triggering a bioweapons research race, or even worse. Says Jackie Cabasso of Western States Legal Foundation in Oakland, CA: "*With biological weapons, the line between offense and defense is exceedingly difficult to draw. In the end, secrecy is the greatest enemy of safety. Last year, the US single-handedly blew apart an international system for inspections of these kinds of laboratories, a system that would have made great strides toward ensuring that biodefense labs aren't abused for offensive purposes. Having thumbed our nose at the world, the US is now massively expanding its biodefense program, mostly in secretive facilities. Other countries are going to be suspicious. This bodes badly for the future of biological weapons control.*"

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