

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****BioWatch Present and Future: Meeting Mission Needs for Effective Biosurveillance?***

September 13, 2012 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, & Communications and the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Infrastructure Protection, & Security Technologies *joint* hearing entitled “BioWatch Present and Future: Meeting Mission Needs for Effective Biosurveillance?”

“As many of us remember, one week after the September 11th attacks, the nation was subjected to anthrax attacks. Envelopes containing a powder laced with anthrax spores were delivered in the mail and were directed at Capitol Hill offices and various media outlets. These poisoned envelopes killed five people and infected 17 others. According to the FBI, the ensuing investigation became “one of the largest and most complex in the history of law enforcement”.

The legislative response to these attacks was to enact a measure that would provide an early warning system to detect the release of harmful biological or chemical compounds in our major cities. We called the program BioShield. Eleven years and \$800 million dollars later, the program is called BioWatch. Eleven years and \$800 million dollars later, we still do not have an early warning system that can quickly and efficiently detect the release of a harmful biological or chemical compound in our major cities. Eleven years and \$800 million dollars later, it is time to reconsider the likelihood of the risk and adjust our priorities.

Although today’s hearing is about Generation 3 of BioWatch, I wanted to provide the historical context of this program because we must understand that we are on Generation 3 because Generations 1 and 2 did not work. The technological component of this program, which originally began in 2003, has suffered from poor planning, poor execution and poor performance throughout its life cycle.

We should seriously consider whether the technology Congress envisioned is capable of being produced. It seems that the answer is—not yet. GAO recommends that before continuing with the acquisition, DHS reevaluate the mission need, investigate alternatives and develop performance, schedule, and cost information. Given the history of this program and the \$800 million that has been spent, GAO’s recommendations seem reasonable and sound.

I urge DHS to reconsider its plan to proceed with the acquisition. Before yielding back, I want to make note that not all of BioWatch should be reconsidered. It is my understanding that the program has strengthened interactions and partnerships between the Federal, State, and local public health community. The increased interaction and information sharing that has come about as a result of those relationships will serve this nation well. We know that those relationships were important a few years ago when we were concerned about a flu pandemic.

The interaction among the public health sector helped this nation quickly mobilize, take preventive action and provide precautionary vaccines to millions of people. So Mr. Chairman, whatever the fate of Biowatch, I think we all benefit by continuing to provide grants and other incentives for the public health community to work together.”

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