



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Improving the Department of Homeland Security's Biological Detection and Surveillance Programs***

June 10, 2015 (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 “Improving the Department of Homeland Security’s Biological Detection and Surveillance Programs”:

“The Department of Homeland Security’s signature programs in this mission space – BioWatch and the National Biosurveillance Integration Center (NBIC) – have historically struggled to meet Congress’ expectations. This Committee has conducted exhaustive oversight of the BioWatch program since it was transferred to the Department and NBIC since it was authorized in the 9/11 Act. Let me also mention that I appreciate Mr. Payne and Ms. McSally’s efforts to continue those efforts.

That said, I have grown frustrated that we seem to be having the same hearing over and over again. At least once every Congress, we ask the Department to come before the Committee to respond to the latest criticisms of BioWatch and NBIC. In 2012, we asked about reports of false positives with the currently deployed BioWatch system, a 2011 National Academy of Sciences report that found that current BioWatch technology would work in very limited circumstances, and acquisition challenges that ultimately proved to be Gen-3’s demise.

At the time, we were assured that the currently deployed BioWatch system did work and that the Office of Health Affairs would work closely with the Science and Technology directorate to identify new technology to address shortcomings of the archaic BioWatch system. Two years after the Gen-3 acquisition was officially canceled, it is unclear whether we have made any concrete progress in identify new biodetection technology.

Worse yet, last fall, both the Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense and the Government Accountability Office released reports raising questions about what benefit the current BioWatch program provides. The questions raised by the Study Panel and GAO were many of the same questions raised by our Members and the National Academy of Science years ago. Similarly, the Government Accountability Office has been raising questions about the value of NBIC since 2009.

While I commend the Office of Health Affairs for fully implementing the recommendations GAO made to improve the NBIC, it still appears that NBIC struggles to effectively collect, integrate, and analyze biosurveillance data from across the Federal government to identify emerging threats.

Despite laudable efforts, GAO reports NBIC struggles to get access to the information it needs to do its job and some stakeholders say the produce NBIC produces are not timely or useful. The Blue Ribbon Panel echoed these concerns, particularly regarding stalled progress on identifying innovative data sources. These are many of the problems we heard about in 2009. I am frustrated that we are sitting here today having the same conversations we were having almost four years ago, and I want to understand what it will take to move the ball.

Today, I want to learn what challenges are undermining progress. Is it a question of insufficient resources for these programs? Is it a lack of centralized leadership on biodefense issues at the Federal level guiding prioritization, coordination, and investments? Is it time to rethink the mission of these programs so they are responsive to the current threat environment and capability gaps?

Help us understand the challenges you are facing, your vision for these programs, and what you need from Congress. I look forward to the testimony today, and I hope that we will hear a concrete strategy for making concrete improvement on programs that DHS has struggled with for too long.”

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