

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Payne Jr.

“Food for Thought: Efforts to Defend the Nation’s Agriculture and Food”

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

Friday, February 26, 2016

Biological threats are evolving. As these threats evolve, so does our perspective about how we can best protect against the damage they can inflict. This Subcommittee has historically focused on the human health impact of the biological threats. I am pleased that we are expanding the scope of our oversight to include the impact to U.S. agriculture and food supply.

I represent the 10th Congressional district of New Jersey. My district is not known for its rolling fields of corn, hog pens, or open cattle ranges. It is, however, home of the Port of Newark and Newark Liberty International Airport.

Customs and Border Protection Agriculture Specialists at that airport clear up to 20,000 passengers every day. At Port Newark – one of the busiest ports on the East Coast – specialists inspect imported food items, marble slabs, tiles, and wood packing material, all of which can carry insects or other snails that could harm domestic agriculture.

Yet, just this week, I heard from CBP employees in my district about insufficient Agriculture Specialist staffing. The Port of Newark and Newark Liberty International Airport are top performing ports, with top interception numbers, and several “First in Nation” insect finds.

But I am concerned that unless the staffing challenges are resolved, there’s a risk that a new foreign insect could go undetected and do harm to the agriculture industry and the safety of the food supply. Although I recognize that we may not be able to stop every dangerous insect or pathogen from entering our borders, we must be vigilant.

With that said, I also recognize that there are domestic risks to the agriculture industry and food supply – related to natural disasters, emerging disease, and bad actors. Last year, for example, an avian influenza outbreak was responsible for nearly \$400 million in losses to the egg and poultry industry.

And consumers paid the price at the grocery store. Although avian influenza was a naturally-occurring event, the financial losses sustained served as a sobering example of the economic damage that a significant agricultural incident could inflict.

The food and agriculture industry is valued at nearly a trillion dollars in the United States, and its criticality to the American people is without question. That is why the Federal government has designated the Food and Agriculture Sector a critical infrastructure sector since 2003. Although there are multiple efforts to enhance the security of the agriculture industry underway at the Federal and State level, as well as within industry, significant challenges remain.

For example, earlier this month, this Subcommittee held a hearing on the Department of Homeland Security’s struggle to achieve a national biosurveillance capability to collect and analyze biosurveillance data related to human health, animal health, and plant health. Unfortunately, this DHS’ National Biosurveillance Integration Center has struggled to effectively execute its mission for nearly a decade, to the detriment of efforts to improve agriculture biosurveillance capabilities. I will be interested to know what, if any, recommendations the witnesses have to improve the national biosurveillance capability in that regard.

Additionally, I will be interested in understanding how information related to emerging diseases, emergency planning for natural disasters, and terrorist threats is shared with stakeholders in the agriculture industry and whether the information is actionable.

Finally, I am eager to learn from our witnesses how the private sector, educational institutions, and other non-government entities can play an active role in developing and enhancing biosecurity protocols for the agriculture industry as a whole.