



**Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Martha McSally (R-AZ)
Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communication Subcommittee
House Homeland Security Committee**

Improving the Department of Homeland Security's Biological Detection and Surveillance Programs

Remarks as Prepared

The Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications has a long history of oversight on the issue of bioterrorism. So far this Congress, we have held multiple hearings and a classified briefing on this threat.

The threat is real. We know terrorist groups, like ISIS, have an interest in utilizing biological agents in their attacks. In fact, a little over a year ago, a laptop reportedly retrieved from an ISIS hideout in Syria contained plans for weaponizing bubonic plague and a document discussing the advantages of using biological weapons. And we know ISIS is intent on conducting attacks in the U.S.

In his 2016 Worldwide Threat Assessment provided earlier this week, the Director of National Intelligence noted that weapons of mass destruction continue to be a major threat to U.S. security. He remarked that biological materials and technologies, as well as personnel with the expertise to design and use them, move easily in the economy. The DNI also stated that infectious disease continues to threaten our security and that a more crowded and interconnected world is increasing the opportunities for human and animal diseases to emerge and spread globally – something we're seeing right now with the Zika virus.

A bio attack could cause illness or death in hundreds of thousands of people, overwhelm our public health capabilities, and have an economic impact of over one trillion dollars per incident.

Our Nation's capacity to mitigate the impacts of all types of biological events is a top national security priority. But, we know that our efforts leave room for improvement.

The Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense's report, which was released in October, highlights shortcomings of the Department of Homeland Security's biological surveillance and detection efforts through the National Biosurveillance Integration System (NBIS) and the BioWatch Program.

In testimony before the Full Committee, Blue Ribbon Co-Chair and former Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge stated, "DHS has made only limited progress with BioWatch and the National Biosurveillance Integration System...and at great expense." Limited information sharing from Federal NBIS partners has hampered the effectiveness of the National Biosurveillance Integration Center (NBIC), and BioWatch uses aging equipment, despite the fact that other agencies have fielded more advanced detection technology. He recommended, "either we make these effective tools or we replace them."

The Government Accountability Office also completed reviews of NBIC and BioWatch, containing a number of similar findings to the Blue Ribbon Study Panel. With respect to BioWatch, the review found that DHS did not conduct sufficient testing to determine that the technology can effectively meet the program's objectives.

Which brings us to today's hearing. In light of the threats we face, the Department of Homeland Security must have biological detection and surveillance programs in place, which serve to enhance our security and provide a return on our investment.

I am interested in hearing from Dr. Brinsfield about how the Office of Health Affairs (OHA) is working to address the findings of these reviews and chart an effective course for these programs. I am also interested in learning more about collaborative efforts between OHA and the Science and Technology Directorate to determine next steps for BioWatch.

With that in mind, the Ranking Member and I had a discussion with industry representatives on this very topic yesterday. We were concerned to hear that there has been limited engagement with the innovators who may have interim and long-term solutions to these problems. If you don't communicate your plans with industry, they can't plan for how they might be able to support you.

These are complex problems and we must work collaboratively at all levels of government and with our private sector partners to address them.

With that, I welcome our witnesses. I look forward to your testimony.

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