Hearing of the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology
United States House of Representatives

"Surveying the Threat of Agroterrorism:
Perspectives on Food, Agriculture, and Veterinary Defense"

September 16, 2025

Statement for the Record

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Summary

Since its inception in 2014, the Commission has recognized the importance of safeguarding food and agriculture from biological threats. Despite how critical the food and agriculture sector is to the Nation, federal attention to, and investment in, biodefense activities that support animal and plant health have historically lagged behind those for human health. The uneven response to last year's highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak demonstrates that we are not as prepared as we need to be for future threats. Not all states are taking the same approach to responding to animal disease threats. The federal government lacks sufficient coordination and speed in addressing a fast-moving novel threat. Agricultural producers need to be engaged as equal partners and educated about the risks posed by newly emerging or newly transmissible diseases. Medical countermeasure development, approval, and stockpiling are not where they need to be.

In 2015, the Commission released our foundational report, *A National Blueprint for Biodefense: Major Reform Needed to Optimize Efforts*, containing 33 recommendations and 87 associated action items for national biodefense. That report included a recommendation pertaining to taking a One Health approach to national biodefense that better coordinates and integrates human and animal health. In subsequent years, the Commission released two reports that directly address food and agriculture. The 2017 report, *Defense of Animal Agriculture* contains recommendations for investigations of animal pathogen events, development of animal medical countermeasures, information sharing, and coordination of federal biodefense activities impacting animal health. In the 2022 report, *Boots on the Ground: Land-Grant Universities in the Fight Against Threats to Food and Agriculture*, the Commission provides recommendations for strengthening federal support for state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) activities to protect food and agriculture from biological threats, and explores ways to engage the land-grant universities in augmenting national biosurveillance, research and development, and outreach and education efforts. The Commission's 2024 report, *The National Blueprint for Biodefense: Immediate Action Needed to Defend Against Biological Threats,* builds on this previous work, and addresses further recommendations for plant health surveillance, research, and development.

Statement

Chairman Strong, Ranking Member Kennedy, and other Members of the Committee, thank you for your invitation to provide the perspective of the Bipartisan Commission on Biodefense during today's hearing, "Surveying the Threat of Agroterrorism: Perspectives on Food, Agriculture, and Veterinary Defense." I am honored to talk with you today about biological threats to food and agriculture, federal agro-biodefense programs executed by the Department of Homeland Security, and the state of our national biodefense. My name is Asha M. George, DrPH, and I am the Executive Director of the Bipartisan Commission on Biodefense.

The Commission is co-chaired by former Secretary of Homeland Security, Governor Tom Ridge and former Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Representative Donna Shalala; with former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle; former Representative Fred Upton; former Representative Anna Eshoo; former Representative Susan Brooks (who served on the Committee on Homeland Security); former Representative Jim Greenwood; former Under Secretary of Homeland Security for Intelligence and Analysis Ken Wainstein (who also served as Homeland Security Advisor to President George W. Bush); and former Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration Peggy Hamburg serving as Commissioners. The Commissioners and I have addressed homeland, national, and public health security in various capacities for decades. Although we have left our previous positions, we remain committed to public service and the public health, safety, and security of our Nation.

In 2015, the Commission released our foundational report, *A National Blueprint for Biodefense: Major Reform Needed to Optimize Efforts*, containing 33 recommendations and 87 associated action items for eliminating what we identified as serious capability gaps in national biodefense. In the decade since we released that report, Congress, and the Administrations have addressed many of our recommendations, including the creation of a National Biodefense Strategy (Recommendation 3). We appreciate the original iteration of the Strategy released by the Trump Administration in 2018 and the more recent October 2022 refresh released by the Biden Administration. We eagerly await the Strategy's comprehensive implementation by the federal government.

However, though progress has been made over the years, the Nation remains critically at risk of a biological event, whether intentional, accidental, or natural. Accordingly, the Commission decided last year to release an update to our original *Blueprint*. Titled, *The National Blueprint for Biodefense: Immediate Action Needed to Defend Against Biological Threats*, this 2024 report incorporates the lessons learned by the Commission during the course of its work over the past eleven years. The experiences of the Nation's response to COVID-19, mpox, Ebola, highly pathogenic avian influenza, and numerous other pathogens that have emerged during that time informed the report's 36 recommendations and 185 action items.

Other Commission recommendations have been taken up in a variety of legislative vehicles, including the Farm Bill, Intelligence Authorization Act, and Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness and Advancing Innovation Act. Most recently, the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 (Public Law 118-159) required the Department of Defense to conduct Biodefense Posture Reviews in 2026 and 2029, building off of the progress made in the Department's first Review in 2023. The Act also elevated the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear Deterrence, Chemical, and Biological

Defense Policy and Programs to a position that straddles the Offices of the Under Secretary of Policy and Under Secretary of Acquisition and Sustainment, to better align weapons of mass destruction activities within those entities. Both of these ideas came from recommendations in the Commission's 2024 *National Blueprint for Biodefense.* Last year the Commission also issued the *Proposed Congressional Hearings on the Recommendations of the 2024 National Blueprint for Biodefense* to assist in future congressional oversight of the federal biodefense enterprise.

Though human health rightfully garners a tremendous amount of attention with regard to biodefense, animal health, plant health, and food safety are equally critical elements of the Nation's biodefense enterprise. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, agriculture, food, and related industries contributed approximately $1.537 trillion to US GDP in 2023. A single animal or plant pathogen – introduced intentionally or spread naturally – could have devastating consequences for multiple industries in this critical infrastructure sector. We have all witnessed how highly pathogenic avian influenza can devastate not just poultry producers but also dairy farms, raising the price of eggs and dairy products for all consumers. And those are the effects of a virus we are relatively familiar with and for which we have developed or are developing countermeasures. Other threats loom on the horizon and could inflict event greater damage on American farming and associated industries. For example, estimates suggest that the arrival of African Swine Fever in the United States could cause $15 billion in losses for the domestic pork industry in just the first two years after introduction alone, and potentially as much as $50 billion in the long term. Wheat blast could have catastrophic consequences for the Nation's wheat supply. Both of these diseases, and many others, are already present in the Western Hemisphere, increasing the chances that the United States will eventually have to determine how best to respond to, recover from, and mitigate their impacts.

Since its inception in 2014, the Commission has recognized the importance of safeguarding food and agriculture from biological threats. In our original 2015 *National Blueprint for Biodefense*, our Commission discussed the need to: (1) better integrate federal human, animal, and environmental health activities into a One Health approach; and (2) include the Department of Agriculture in the development process for any National Biodefense Strategy. In the years since that report's release, we continue to draw attention to the threats to this critical infrastructure sector, and the capability gaps that leave us unprepared for future biological events affecting food and agriculture. That activity has included public meetings held at Kansas State University (in 2017) and Colorado State University (in 2019) to discuss these threats; federal, state and local activities to address these threats; and how we can better leverage land-grant universities to assist the government in protecting food and agriculture. Based on the information we gathered at those meetings, our independent research, and further discussions with subject matter experts, we have to date produced two reports dedicated to strengthening the federal government's food and agriculture defense activities.

The 2017 report, *Defense of Animal Agriculture,* contains recommendations for the investigation of events involving animal pathogens, development of animal medical countermeasures, information sharing, and coordination of federal biodefense activities impacting animal health. In the 2022 report, *Boots on the Ground: Land-Grant Universities in the Fight Against Threats to Food and Agriculture*, the Commission provides recommendations to strengthen federal support for state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) activities to protect food and agriculture from biological threats, and explores ways to engage the land-grant universities in using their

capabilities to augment national biosurveillance, research and development, and outreach and education efforts with regard to food and agriculture.

Despite how critical the Food and Agriculture Critical Infrastructure Sector is to the Nation, federal attention to, and investment in, biodefense activities that support animal and plant health have historically lagged behind those for human health. In 2023, the Office of Management and Budget produced the first annual crosscut analysis of federal biodefense spending, as required by the William M. (Mac) Thornberry Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283), and in accordance with Recommendation 4 from our 2015 *National Blueprint for Biodefense* for the requirement of such a crosscut. The crosscut revealed that the Department of Agriculture spent $700 million on biodefense activities in Fiscal Year 2022, compared to $8.4 billion spent by the Department of Health and Human Services. The National Veterinary Stockpile, which is designed to store critical veterinary supplies, equipment, animal vaccines, and response support services for SLTT governments, received $6.5 million in appropriations in Fiscal Year 2025, compared to $980 million for the Strategic National Stockpile. The National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN) has been historically underfunded through annual appropriations relative to their mission. The National Plant Diagnostic Network receives even less funding support for the critical work of tracking the numerous plant pathogens that are circulating within the United States at any given time. In lieu of dedicated appropriations for animal and plant health response, the Department of Agriculture relies on its borrowing authority through the Commodity Credit Corporation for any emergency funding it may require to combat animal and plant health disease outbreaks, including highly pathogenic avian influenza.

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-334, also known as the 2018 Farm Bill) made some progress by increasing funding for the NAHLN temporarily, establishing a National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program (NADPRP), and creating the National Animal Vaccine and Veterinary Countermeasures Bank (NAVVCB). The Commission recommended the creation of both the NADPRP and the NAVVCB in our 2017 report *Defense of Animal Agriculture.* The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (Public Law 119-21) signed into law by President Trump a few months ago contained a provision that directed an additional $233 million from the Commodity Credit Corporation to support these activities through Fiscal Year 2030.

Deficiencies remain. The uneven response to last year's highly pathogenic avian influenza epidemic demonstrates that we are not as prepared as we need to be for future threats. Not all states are taking the same approach to responding to disease threats to food and agriculture. The federal government lacks sufficient coordination and speed in addressing fast-moving novel threats. Agricultural producers need to be engaged as equal partners and educated about the risks posed by newly emerging and newly transmissible diseases. Medical countermeasure development, approval, and stockpiling are not where it needs to be.

Given the jurisdiction of the Committee on Homeland Security, I would be remiss if I did not also discuss the Department of Homeland Security's biodefense activities and where they specifically align with animal and plant health defense. All but one of the operational components within the Department engage in activities that contribute to national biodefense generally:

- Agricultural inspectors within U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) work to prevent disease carrying pests from crossing our borders.

- CBP and the Transportation Security Administration screen passengers at ports-of-entry when diseases (including those that could affect food and agriculture) move through the global transit system.
- FEMA bears responsibility for providing logistical and emergency management expertise to support national response activities, which is in no small part why President Donald Trump asked them to step in to support the national response to COVID-19 in March 2020. The agency also oversees direct assistance programs to non-federal governments through the State Homeland Security Grant Program.
- The U.S. Coast Guard advises vessel owners and operators to report suspected crewmembers and passengers sick with diseases of concern to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of its longstanding responsibility to implement quarantine measures.
- The U.S. Secret Service maintains discreet protective measures to defend the White House from biological attacks and manages the biological risk to National Special Security Events.
- U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement works to combat counterfeit pharmaceuticals and theft of intellectual property rights (such as for newly developed medical countermeasures) and plays a critical role in export enforcement.
- The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency previously addressed biodefense of critical infrastructure during the H1N1 influenza pandemic and issued guidance to the sectors early in the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Science and Technology Directorate supports biological attribution and characterization activities through the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center (NBACC).

In 2017, the Department combined some of its existing chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological functions into an Office of Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD). Congress subsequently authorized the Office a year later and assigned the Assistant Secretary for CWMD statutory responsibilities for coordinating Department of Homeland Security activities for defending food, agriculture, and veterinary systems, as enumerated in the Securing Our Agriculture and Food Act (Public Law 115-43). Though Department officials envisioned CWMD as a central hub for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) policy and activities within the Department, authorizing legislation did not reflect that mission and the Department did not utilize it in that way. CWMD ultimately turned out to be little more than the sum of its parts, focusing on legacy programs that existed before the Office's creation with some additional elements brought over from other parts of the Department of Homeland Security (e.g., WMD intelligence and analysis, removed from the Office of Intelligence and Analysis).

Perhaps in recognition of this reality, the Department of Homeland Security moved the position of Chief Medical Officer from CWMD to a newly-created Office of Health Security, which consolidated departmental health care, occupational health, and public health responsibilities. The Department also moved CWMD food and agriculture defense responsibilities to this new Office. The Office of Health Security has been involved in government-wide discussions regarding the protection of food and agriculture, but this office neither coordinates the Department's activities in this space, nor do they possess the personnel and resources to effectively execute such a mission.

The biodefense responsibilities of CWMD focus largely on two longstanding programs addressing biosurveillance and biological detection:

- The National Biosurveillance Integration Center (NBIC), which was intended to collect and analyze biosurveillance data from other federal departments and agencies to enable early warning and shared situational awareness of biological events, including among animal populations. However, NBIC lacks the authorities and resources necessary to fully achieve this goal. Congress did not mandate that other federal departments and agencies provide this data to the Department of Homeland Security. The Center has been left with publicly available sources of information to inform their products, limiting its effectiveness. To illustrate this problem, the Department of Agriculture does not currently share the data it receives from states and the agricultural industry with the Department of Homeland Security.

- The BioWatch biological detection program has been in service for 22 years, dating back to its initial deployment by the George W. Bush Administration to provide a modicum of biological detection capability against potential attacks in advance of the 2004 presidential election. Located in about 35 metropolitan jurisdictions, the system collects air samples in outdoor public spaces that must then be manually gathered at least once every 24 hours. Public health laboratories then test the samples for the presence of five biological agents. However, the equipment barely functions, and the system (including testing) takes too long to produce results. Hospital admissions would indicate a biological event long before the system definitively reported a positive test result. The system is operating with the same technology from its 2003 deployment.

After 7 years, CWMD in 2024 finally terminated BD21 (or Biodefense for the 21st Century), its troubled replacement program to identify, acquire, procure, and deploy replacement technology for the BioWatch program. Though CWMD continues to engage with stakeholders and industry to determine how best to improve upon the BioWatch program, they are no closer to a more capable national biological detection system than when I last testified before this very subcommittee six years ago. The Department of Homeland Security continues to spend more than $80 million in taxpayer money each year for the existing, flawed BioWatch program.

Recommendation 31 from our *National Blueprint for Biodefense* called for the development of an advanced environmental detection system to replace BioWatch. The Commission further examined the program and potential solutions in our 2021 report *Saving Sisyphus: Advanced Biodetection for the 21st Century*. Understanding the political reality that Congress will not terminate BioWatch without a replacement in place, *Saving Sisyphus* presents short and long-term action plans to both deploy better technology right now and to create a technology development process to regularly refresh both the biological detection mission and technology. A research and development strategy that regularly reassesses the mission of the system and the needs of participating jurisdictions is also essential.

President Trump's Fiscal Year 2026 budget proposes eliminating CWMD and dispersing its programs to other elements within the Department. This is of little surprise to the Commission. We believe that the ability of the Department to counter weapons of mass destruction would not be meaningfully impacted by the closure of Office and the transfer of those capabilities to other

components. However, the end of CWMD would not also mean the end of the Department's mission to address chemical, biological, nuclear, or radiological threats to the homeland, nor should Congress or the Administration redirect WMD funding for non-WMD purposes. Biodefense (including agro-biodefense) should remain a priority for the Department of Homeland Security. Should Congress choose to accede to the Administration's request to dissolve CWMD and redistribute its capabilities, enacting legislation should also establish regular review of Department of Homeland Security biodefense activities. Congress should require the Department of Homeland Security to compile and submit an annual report on its biodefense policies, programs, and expenditures as they align with the National Biodefense Strategy. As the Department of Homeland Security should already be providing much of this information in support of the congressionally-mandated biodefense crosscut, it should be easy for the Department to provide this information to Congress as well.

Lastly, we cannot ignore the broader state of biodefense when discussing the defense of food and agriculture. Biological threats continue to increase. Our enemies can see for themselves the disruption that highly pathogenic avian influenza has caused within the United States, as well as the damage done by other disease outbreaks throughout the world. Technology has made it easier to weaponize biological agents. Diseases are spreading more frequently and easily within and among countries, with increased likelihood of spillovers from one animal population to another, from animals to humans, and from humans to animals. Measles and other diseases are reemerging in the United States, including most recently tuberculosis, mumps, pertussis, and rubella, increasing the disease burden on our healthcare system and leaving us more vulnerable to the impacts of animal disease transmission to human populations.

Defending the Nation against biological threats that affect national security is not, and has never been, a top priority for any of the 15 Cabinet departments, 9 independent agencies, and 1 independent institution (the Smithsonian) that possess responsibilities for biodefense. Biodefense has always been disgracefully, woefully, and incomprehensively underfunded. We cannot continue to rely forever on emergency supplemental appropriations or withdrawals from the Commodity Credit Corporation to make up for weak defense against biological threats. As a Nation, we have never been adequately prepared for the biological events that have occurred, and we know that, because we never do seem to avoid the deaths of hundreds, thousands, and sometimes millions when those events occur. The implemented and proposed cuts to biodefense programs do not exist in a vacuum.

Biodefense is in crisis and has long been in crisis.

Our Commission has advocated in the past for reevaluation of federal biodefense programs and policies, of exploring opportunities to find efficiencies in how the government engages in activities to prevent, deter, prepare for, detect, respond to, attribute, recover from, and mitigate biological events. And we have suggested that certain programs – such as BioWatch –need to be replaced or eliminated. Such reductions or realignments should be made thoughtfully, with an eye towards how we as a Nation can continue to meet the goals of the National Biodefense Strategy President Trump issued in 2018. The requirements are still the requirements, regardless of available resources and personnel, and we need to be able to meet those requirements. The Nation still requires biosurveillance. The Nation still requires diagnostics, vaccines, therapeutics, and other medical countermeasures. And the Nation still requires a well-equipped and well-

staffed public health and animal health departments. The Administration should strongly consider taking some of the funds they are saving from ongoing cuts and reinvesting those funds in programs that actually work. The Administration also needs to make future cuts with current and previous cuts in mind.

This concludes my written remarks. The Bipartisan Commission on Biodefense appreciates the Subcommittee's interest in biological threats affecting food and agriculture, and the Department of Homeland Security's contributions to national biodefense. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of the organizations that support our efforts financially and otherwise. With this testimony, I am submitting three of the Commission's reports (*The National Blueprint for Biodefense, Defense of Animal Agriculture,* and *Boots on the Ground*), and the Commission's first annual State of Biodefense Address. Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions and working with you to defend the Nation against biological threats.