

**“Agroterrorism: The Threat to America’s Breadbasket”**  
**Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs Hearing**  
**November 19, 2003**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Nov. 19, the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs held a two-panel hearing on agroterrorism. Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) chaired the full Committee hearing with Sens. Daniel Akaka (D-HI); Richard Durbin (D-IL); and Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) also attending. The hearing focused on the dangers to the U.S. agriculture industry posed by agroterrorism. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) testified on the same panel, while representatives from the states of Illinois and North Carolina as well as the RAND Corporation also testified. It is interesting to note that this hearing on agroterrorism, the first since 1999, was the first hearing to include DHS and USDA on the same panel. Because DHS is the lead agency on issues of homeland security and it has assumed control over the Plum Island Animal Defense Center, collaboration with USDA is vital. Members in attendance urged the cooperation of local, state, federal, and non-governmental entities in the fight against agroterrorism. Committee members pledged their support to ensuring that red tape from Washington be streamlined to make sure the food supply of the United States remains the safest and most secure in the world.

*Full testimonies are available upon request.*

Committee Chair Collins (R-ME) expressed concern that the security of the U.S. food supply is too lax. The threat posed to agriculture is real; Al Qaeda, for instance, has shown interest in conducting biological terrorism through crop dusting. She acknowledged that agriculture is an extremely large and critical component of the U.S. economy, and an attack on agriculture and that of the World Trade Center “are merely different manifestations of the same high priority target- the American economy”. Ranking member Daniel Akaka (D-HI) declared his intention to improve the agriculture industry’s biosecurity. Sen. Akaka noted that the nation’s defense was “woefully inadequate”. He also brought attention to two bills he initially sponsored in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress that are still pending: the Agriculture Security Assistance Act (S. 427) and the Agriculture Security Preparedness Act (S.430). Sen. Lautenberg (D-NJ) said that because New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the country, and there is a sizeable agricultural industry, an attack there would be especially devastating. Unfortunately, the state has received a very small amount of federal funding devoted to ensuring food safety. Clearly, food safety and security are a worry, and more attention and funding needs to be allocated to states so they can maintain a high level of safety. There also needs to be a reevaluation of the funding scheme, so that states such as New Jersey can receive a greater share of federal money.

Panel I: Senator Jim Talent- Chairman, Agriculture Sub-Committee for Marketing, Inspection and Promotion; Dr. Tom McGinn- Asst. State Veterinarian, Director of Emergency Programs Division-North Carolina Dept. of Agriculture; Dr. Peter Chalk- Policy Analyst, RAND Corporation; Dr. Colleen O’Keefe- Division Manager of Food Safety & Animal Protection, Illinois Dept. of Agriculture

Sen. Jim Talent (R-MO) stressed the importance of geography, timing, and strategy in addressing the potential dangers of a disease outbreak affecting U.S. agriculture. In the event of an outbreak, there needs to be an assessment on the area at risk, a strategy on how to effectively control a disease, and the ability to perform these tasks in a swift, timely manner. Sen. Talent said that the threat posed by an outbreak is a nationwide problem, and all levels of government need to be active and cooperative.

Dr. Tom McGinn outlined particular concerns with the biosecurity of U.S. agriculture. According to Dr. McGinn, the U.S. needs a surveillance system to detect animal and plant diseases. There is also a deficiency in the ability to predict the path/spread/scope of a disease should one enter the country. In case of an outbreak, Dr. McGinn is concerned that “we lack a vaccine production capability or effective vaccine strategies,” to control the spread of a disease.

Dr. Peter Chalk outlines several vulnerabilities within the agricultural industry that make it susceptible to attack. Most farms have not sufficiently safeguarded against unauthorized access, and in the absence of a structured compensation plan, producers can be hesitant about reporting possible disease. Agroterrorism is particularly dangerous because of the wide array of pathogens; many of the diseases are vigorous and do not break down easily in a natural environment; few of these pathogens are transmittable to humans, negating any fear of handling; and many are extremely virulent.

Dr. O’Keefe maintains that Illinois’ state agencies have taken several steps to enhance communication and disease protocol. Illinois belongs to the Central States Animal Emergency Coordinating Council with six other states and USDA. The Council helps facilitate cooperation and coordination between states and the federal government. It also recommends a livestock tracking system, USDA defined indemnity rates, disposal plans, movement protocol, enhanced prevention and control technology, and ongoing training and testing for staff.

#### Panel I: Questions & Answers

Q: Sen. Collins asked of the current dangers along the food chain.

A: Dr. Chalk said the entire food production process needs reevaluation. This is particularly true of smaller farms where plans and practices are not uniform.

A: Dr. McGinn said the U.S. simply must devote more funding to the development and storage of vaccines because if other countries, such as Great Britain, have outbreaks simultaneously, the U.S. would have difficulty finding suppliers.

Q: Sen. Akaka asked Dr. O’Keefe if there was adequate communication between Illinois and the Federal government.

A: She responded by saying communication is worst between states. She felt that communication with federal officials and agencies was very good. Illinois’ biggest problem is the lack of manpower.

Q: Sen. Durbin inquired as to the jurisdictional problems between agencies.

A: Dr. O’Keefe agreed that there have been problems between federal agencies lacking jurisdiction in certain areas.

Q: Sen. Lautenberg asked about general problems that could occur in case of an outbreak.

A: Dr. O’Keefe felt that culling procedures would prove especially difficult. These procedures are often very time consuming, and there are no defined carcass depositories.

Q: Sen. Lautenberg then asked Dr. Chalk to gauge the threat to agriculture from agroterrorism.

A: Dr. Chalk said that the threat to agriculture is much greater than to humans, because using biological weapons directly against humans is often difficult and the rate of success is small.

Against agriculture, however, the animals become the weapons, so the dissemination of disease, and its subsequent transmission is much easier.

Panel II: Dr. Penrose Albright- Asst. Secretary for Science and Technology, Dept. of Homeland Security; Dr. Lester Crawford- Deputy Commissioner, Food and Drug Administration; Dr. Charles Lambert- Deputy Under-Secretary for Marketing & Regulatory Programs- U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

According to Dr. Albright, the Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) of DHS is one of four directorates created to protect agriculture. Since March 2003, S&T has begun operations to improve security from terrorism within the United States. DHS and USDA have created a Technology Development Roadmap to improve vaccine and other medicinal capabilities and heighten surveillance and detection technologies. Dr. Crawford said the FDA has put forth a ten-point plan to protect and defend against terrorism. This plan includes more qualified personnel, better border control, more research, and enhanced laboratories. The Bioterrorism Act (2002) authorizes the FDA to require the registration of domestic and foreign suppliers of food for animals or humans within the United States. Dr. Lambert testified that the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is training and educating state and local officials to handle disease outbreaks. The Foreign Animal Disease Awareness Training Seminars have been held to better educate veterinarians from all 50 states. APHIS is also working on an educational tool called Food Security: The Threat to American Livestock. This will help producers, state and local officials to respond quickly in case of emergency.

Panel II: Questions & Answers

Q: Sen. Collins began by asking Dr. Albright whether DHS was taking the lead in the defense against agroterrorism.

A: Dr. Albright responded that the agency is currently updating plans to reflect new priorities, risks, and jurisdictions. DHS is probably not technologically prepared for a widespread outbreak.

Q: Sen. Akaka asked Dr. Lambert what steps USDA is taking to ensure security at Plum Island.

A: After Plum Island's initial security failings, USDA authorized an independent review, said Dr. Lambert. There has since been an increase in trained security guards and security upgrades. Plum Island recently passed inspection.

Q: Sen. Collins posed a question to the witnesses about prioritization within the agencies

A: Dr. Crawford said that FDA has conducted risk assessments on the threats posed to FDA approved products.

A: Dr. Lambert said that APHIS has also conducted vulnerability risk assessments.

Q: Sen. Akaka asked Dr. Crawford about FDA's new authority to keep inventory of registered products and the companies that manufacture and distribute them.

A: Dr. Crawford said that in the event of a food safety problem FDA can now debar foreign companies from shipping food into the United States. FDA can also require foreign entities to notify the agency of incoming shipments so that the agency can predict and plan for imports.