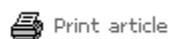


**Global Security Newswire**

by National Journal Group

Daily news on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, terrorism and related issues.

Global Security Newswire is produced independently for the Nuclear Threat Initiative by National Journal Group, Inc. Global Security Newswire is published Monday thru Friday by 2 pm and is available exclusively on the NTI website, www.nti.org.



Friday, October 5, 2007

Lax Biodefense Lab Oversight Putting U.S. at Risk, GAO Says

By Jon Fox

Global Security Newswire

WASHINGTON — The number of U.S. biological laboratories dealing with the most dangerous pathogens has exploded since 2001, increasing the risk of deadly accidents, the Government Accountability Office said yesterday (see [GSN](#), Sept. 25).

Last year's exposure of Texas A&M University researchers to dangerous pathogens and safety breaches at other universities, along with the recent release of foot-and-mouth disease from a laboratory in the United Kingdom, have prompted heightened concerns about the level of risk associated with the proliferation of biological defense facilities (see [GSN](#), Aug. 10).

In testimony yesterday before the House Energy and Water oversight subcommittee, GAO chief technologist Keith Rhodes described a new sprawling biodefense research infrastructure that operates without any centralized government oversight.

More accidents are bound to happen as the number of laboratories increase and more researchers — with varying levels of experience — handle deadly agents, Rhodes said.

Before the terrorists attacks of 2001, there were five high-containment facilities working with the most deadly agents, so-called Biosafety Level Four laboratories. Now there are 14 such research centers and one in the planning stage, government auditors found.

"The more BSL-4 laboratories there are, the more opportunities for mistakes there are, the more opportunities for release," Rhodes warned. "Accidents and safety breaches have occurred in the past and will occur in the future."

The growing number of laboratories produces more staff, more background checks and more handling and transfer of dangerous agents. "It becomes an extremely complex management of material problem," Rhodes said.

He added that the government has no firm figures for the number of operational Biosafety Level 3 facilities that deal with slightly less dangerous but still potentially lethal pathogens. "No one knows how many there are," Rhodes said, "but the number is surely in the thousands."

"The biosafety and biosecurity risks associated with the dramatic and ongoing expansion of high-containment research and research facilities are both real and growing," Alan Pearson, director of Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation's Biological and Chemical Weapons Control Program, said in his written testimony.

Spurred sharply by the 2001 anthrax mail attacks that killed five people, the Bush administration began devoting billions of dollars to biodefense research (see [GSN](#), June 11). The federal government has authorized 15 separate agencies to fund such facilities without producing a single oversight office.

According to an analysis from the Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation funding for bioweapons-related research has increased from \$583 million in fiscal 2001 to more than \$3 billion in fiscal 2007, with the president's request for fiscal 2008 topping \$3.3 billion.

Rhodes called the current oversight system, or lack thereof, "fragmented and decentralized," but he stopped short of suggesting which federal agency should be tapped to take the reins in this arena. That recommendation, he said, is expected in March 2008 when the Government Accountability Office releases its complete [findings](#) on biodefense laboratories.

Rhodes did say that the oversight has to be "completely independent," the oversight agency entirely divorced from the operations of the laboratories.

Subcommittee Chairman Bart Stupak (D-Mich.) struggled to determine if the "mushrooming growth" of these facilities was necessary to develop bioagent countermeasures or if the potential risk outweighs the benefit.

"Has the proliferation of these labs reached a point at which there are so many labs doing this research that you actually increase the chances of a catastrophic release of a deadly disease?" he asked.

Rhodes said the answer to that question is yes but suggested that proper oversight could reduce that risk.

"I want no one to take our preliminary findings and think we're throwing the baby out with the bath water," he said. Rhodes said he was not attacking the number of facilities but rather the convoluted nature of the current oversight system.

"I mean I have a very smart team and even we can't figure it out," he said.

Richard Besser, terrorism preparedness and emergency response director at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said his agency is "really going to take a hard look at all of our lab safety issues."

Most incidents in laboratories, he told the panel, involve human error. "Even a lab that follows all biosafety guidelines may have accidents," Besser said.

The increase in research since 2001 has put the nation in a better position to respond to an attack using a biological agent such as anthrax, he said without offering precise details.

While the administration handed down a directive to increase research on countermeasures following the 2001 terrorist attacks, the number of total laboratories needed to conduct such work was never explicitly outlined. If lawmakers were looking for a suggested number during

the hearing yesterday, they did not find it.

"I don't know if we need more or if we need to have less, but we need to know the ones that we have and we need to know what they're doing," Rhodes said.

Stupak seemed to suggest that the nation already had more than enough. "Less construction, more research," he said.

The Government Accountability Office offered six lessons from recent security incidents at biological facilities in its preliminary findings: officials must identify and overcome barriers to reporting of accidents in order to enhance safety through shared learning from incidents; laboratory staff should be trained in general biosafety as well as in the particular characteristics, safe handling procedures and health effects of agents being studied; strategies for informing medical providers about the agents being used in a particular laboratory should be developed for quick diagnosis and treatment; officials should address confusion over the definition of exposure to aid consistent reporting; ensuring security measures are commensurate with the level of risk; and continued maintenance at the laboratories to ensure the integrity of the facilities' infrastructure.

[About Newswire](#) | [Contact National Journal](#) | [Re-Use Guidelines](#)

© Copyright 2007 by National Journal Group, Inc. The material in this section is produced independently for NTI by National Journal Group, Inc. Any reproduction or retransmission, in whole or in part, is a violation of federal law and is strictly prohibited without the consent of the National Journal Group, Inc. All rights reserved.
