

## [Global Security Newswire](#)

# Drastic Price Increase Could Threaten Bioagent Detection Program

June 18, 2012



Manager Thomas Bunt in July 2011 works in a mobile laboratory that is part of the U.S. Biowatch disease agent detection program. Spiraling costs could threaten the future of the program, according to a news report (AP Photo/Ben Margot)

The escalating costs of a federal program aimed at providing an early warning in the event of a biological weapons attack could result in the effort being scaled back or even canceled altogether, Bloomberg on Monday quoted one expert as saying (see [GSN](#), April 5).

The [Homeland Security](#) Department in October intends to begin accepting contractor bids to produce a third generation of Biowatch detectors that would feature enhanced capabilities such as the capacity to analyze air samples and digitally deliver findings in a few hours. Biowatch detectors presently located in more than 30 large cities need up to 48 hours to deliver findings, in part because their filters need to be manually removed and transported to a laboratory, according to the

report.

The half-decade DHS contract could be worth up to \$3.1 billion.

The Biowatch program was created in the wake of the 2001 anthrax attacks that killed five people and sickened 17. Authorities needed in excess of 14 days to determine what disease agent was being used in the mailings, according to Rutgers [University professor](#) Leonard Cole, who wrote a book on the attacks.

"Before Biowatch, we were all canaries in a coal mine. Only after people dropped dead or became ill did we understand that a pathogen was floating around," Cole said to Bloomberg.

Since its creation, the federal biosurveillance effort has been plagued by busted schedules and price increases.

Biowatch costs going back to 2003 have amounted to approximately \$800 million, House Homeland Security [Emergency Preparedness](#), Response and Communications Subcommittee Ranking Member Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.) said at a March hearing.

Subcommittee Chairman Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.) said he wants guarantees that Biowatch spending will stay on budget and has requested a Government Accountability Office assessment of sought-after new funding for the program.

"The program could find itself in danger of being cut back or completely scrapped if lawmakers determine that it's becoming a major and costly acquisition failure," Monument Policy Group consultant Jessica Herrera-Flanigan said in an interview.

Bilirakis and Thompson are both skeptical of the DHS effort to develop and deploy another generation of Biowatch sensors. Legislators are "increasingly concerned about the viability of this developing technology and also about the department's ability to deploy it on time and within budget," Bilirakis said at a subpanel hearing.

The GAO assessment is to be delivered in August and "will not be considered lightly, especially given our country's current fiscal situation and the price tag for the Biowatch program," the Florida lawmaker said in a recent e-mail statement.

A 2010 assessment by the congressional watchdog found that total projected expenses for the biosurveillance effort increased from \$921 million in 2010 to \$2.1 billion in 2011. A separate 2011 report by a DHS consultancy firm estimated that lifetime costs could amount to \$5.7 billion.

The differences between the 2010 GAO assessment and the 2011 contractor analysis "cannot be validly compared," Biowatch spokesman Noah Bartolucci stated by e-mail.

The \$5.7 billion estimate addresses a greater period of time than the \$2.1 billion figure -- 17 years compared to a decade. Additionally, Biowatch officials "assigned no confidence level" to the lower price assessment, according to Bartolucci.

The national defense need for Biowatch will have to be assessed in tandem to increasing program costs, program manager Michael Walter said.

"From a public health standpoint we have to ask if this program is going to be useful in reducing casualties and will it be an improvement over the current system," the Biowatch official said. "How do you deal with the value of human life and human suffering?" (Carol Wolf, Bloomberg/[Washington Post](#), June 18).