

Help Stop a Biological Weapons Lab In North Carolina

On July 31, 2007 the US Department of Homeland Security issued a Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for a National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility. The NC Consortium for the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility, a public-private partnership based in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill Triangle, is trying to convince the US Dept. of Homeland Security that North Carolina is the best site for the proposed facility. The head of the consortium is Warwick Arden, Dean of the NCSU College of Veterinary Medicine. Last year the consortium prepared a detailed summary of the facility and sent the proposal to the Dept. of Homeland Security. In July potential sites were selected in five states including North Carolina. But the people of North Carolina have an opportunity to stop this proposal now.

Facts

The NBAF would be a new defense research laboratory for biological warfare agents. The lab would research and develop “zoonotic diseases and countermeasure tools.” Zoonotic diseases are those which can be transmitted from vertebrate animals to humans. The laboratory would house microorganisms which pose a risk of life-threatening disease and for which there is no known vaccine or therapy.

The proposed site is the NC Dept of Agriculture’s Umstead Research Farm in Granville County. The Umstead Research Farm is served by the South Granville Water and Sewer Authority. Lake Butner and Falls Lake are nearby water supply sources.

The proposed National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility would be a Bio-Safety Level 4 laboratory. BSL-4 is required for work with dangerous and exotic biological organisms which cause life-threatening diseases and which pose a high risk of being transmitted through the air.

Operations at the facility would include outdoor grazing for animals used in research. When asked about details such as how many animals would need to be kept and the criteria for research capabilities, DHS responded “Specific facility and infrastructure requirements have not been determined.”

The US Department of Energy reported that the proposed facility would have on site up to 25,000 samples of pathogens, a total of 100 liters (26 gallons) of biological agents. But the DOE’s Environmental Assessment did not analyze the environmental and health impacts of a release of the laboratory’s total inventory of disease-causing organisms.

The DOE’s Environmental Assessment did not fully assess potential terrorist threats. For example, the EA assumed that most biological agents would be destroyed in a terrorist attack and, therefore, that few would escape into the environment and pose a hazard to the public.

Without evidence or analysis, the DOE Environmental Assessment suggested that a potential terrorist would rather try to find dangerous pathogens in nature than attempt to steal them from a government facility.

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Existing Capability in North Carolina and Other Sites

There are already nearly two dozen bio-safety level 3 facilities in Triangle colleges, universities and state and federal government agencies including NCDA Rollins Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab. The State Laboratory of Public Health with bio-terror capability operates four BSL3 facilities. BSL4 facilities exist in Atlanta and Maryland. ***Do we really need another in NC?***

At present, the US Department of Homeland Security operates a similar facility on New York's Plum Island. In a letter to DHS, Senator Joe Lieberman said the following about the Plum Island operation: "The facility is a biosafety level 3 agricultural laboratory that studies highly contagious animal diseases as well as diseases, such as West Nile Virus, that can infect both animals and humans. **Consequently, it represents a potential target for terrorists seeking to obtain these pathogens and other terrorist acts** such as the direct release of pathogens into the environment, the release of laboratory animals, or the incapacitation of the U.S. Government's capability to respond to animal-borne diseases."

"The NBAF will be one of the largest and most dangerous biodefense facilities in the world. The proposed NBAF will cover 520,000 square feet, roughly the size of 5 Wal-Mart stores. It will house the most lethal pathogens on Earth. Biosafety Level-3 facilities experiment on infectious or exotic pathogens that are potentially lethal, such as live anthrax, plague and Q fever. Biosafety Level-4s are reserved for extremely exotic biological agents for which there is no known cure, such as Central European tick-borne encephalitis. The biological research at NBAF will spread across a minimum of 30 acres to test on large animals, according to the DHS request for proposals in the federal register."

Tri-Valley CARES <http://www.trivalleycares.org/action.asp>

What You Can Do

First, attend the Public Meeting on September 18, 2007. The Dept. of Homeland Security will invite the public to make oral comments. The meeting will begin at 7:00 PM at the South Granville High School on 701 North Crescent Drive in Creedmore, NC 27522.

Second, send your comments by mail, online, via fax or voice mail. ***The public comment period will end on September 27, 2007.***

- ✓ Postal Mail:
 - US Department of Homeland Security
 - Science and Technology Directorate
 - James V. Johnson
 - Mail Stop #2100
 - 245 Murray Lane, SW, Bldg. 410
 - Washington, DC 20528
- ✓ Online: <http://www.dhs.gov/nbaf> and click on "public involvement."
- ✓ Toll-free Fax: 1-866-508-6223
- ✓ Toll-free voice mail: 1-866-501-6223

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