

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL K. AKAKA

Agro-Defense: Responding to Threats Against America's Agriculture and Food System

Hearing Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Aloha to all of our witnesses and thank you for being here. Today, the Subcommittee will examine the federal government's progress in implementing the nation's food and agriculture defense policy. Specifically, we will look at our readiness to respond to and recover from a terrorist attack and natural disasters affecting food and agriculture, and the Subcommittee will be reviewing a new Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on that topic.

Protecting agriculture is critically important to the well-being of Americans. The U.S. agriculture and food sector annually generates more than \$300 billion worth of food. One in twelve American jobs is in this sector. Agro-terrorism, such as the deliberate introduction of animal and plant diseases, poses a critical threat to both public health and the world economy.

The agricultural and food system is particularly vulnerable because relatively unsophisticated methods could produce tremendous damage. For instance, foot-and-mouth disease is a highly contagious disease affecting cattle and certain other animals. It can easily be transmitted by aerosol, clothing, and shoes. The impact of a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak could be devastating to our country's economy. The 2001 outbreak in the United Kingdom resulted in the slaughter of approximately 7 million animals, and financial losses of \$8 billion to agriculture, tourism, and other sectors.

In 2002, documents from an al Qaeda training camp showed that the terrorist group had researched how to compromise U.S. food supplies. As we mark the ten year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, there is no evidence of a specific agro-terror plot, but we must remain vigilant.

I would like to highlight several issues that particularly concern me that we will address today. GAO will testify that there is no centralized coordination to oversee the federal government's progress in implementing Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9, which spells out our nation's agro-defense policy. This means: we cannot be sure of the effectiveness of agencies' efforts.

Additionally, I am concerned about how well agencies are working with each other and their state, tribal, local, and industry partners. No single agency has the ability to address these threats and challenges alone. All levels of government, industry, and citizens need to work together to limit the consequences if an attack occurs. We will look at different areas where coordination and collaboration is critical, such as information sharing, surveillance, and disaster assistance.

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I am also concerned about the federal veterinarian workforce and its ability to respond to major animal disease outbreaks, such as bird flu or foot-and-mouth disease. Federal veterinarians perform critical food safety, research, and public health functions. I held a hearing in 2009 on this topic, where GAO identified several challenges, including troubling veterinarian shortages at numerous agencies involved in food safety inspections and responding to disease outbreaks. Since that hearing, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has established a council that brings federal agencies together to work on this issue. I look forward to hearing about what progress the agencies here today have made in this area.

Since the September 11th attacks, we have taken steps to prepare for an attack on our food or agricultural systems, but I remain concerned that America is not ready to effectively respond and recover from an agriculture or food event. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses this afternoon and to a productive discussion.

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