Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: Research Oversight
July 11, 2024

Last month, this committee held a hearing on the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. This came as part of the bipartisan biosecurity and life science research investigation that I am conducting with Ranking Member Paul. In that discussion, our expert witnesses raised the need for robust oversight of a wide range of high-risk life sciences research – both here in the United States and abroad. That is the focus of today's hearing.

Life science research can be critical to protecting public health and our national security. It helps us develop vaccines, improve our diagnostic tests, and sharpen our understanding of potential biological threats. If we are to face the health and security challenges of the 21st century, we will absolutely need to draw on high-risk research.

At the same time, this research can be incredibly dangerous. It puts scientists in contact with harmful pathogens, and they sometimes do not get the necessary training on how to handle them properly. If equipment fails or researchers make an innocent mistake, it can carry serious health risks for the broader public. And the dangers are not just about physical materials. This work often includes sensitive information, which can have devastating consequences if it falls into the wrong hands.

In short, we have to strike a delicate balance: between fostering scientific progress and minimizing potential harms. Today's hearing will examine how well we are striking that balance – and if our policies provide enough transparency to Congress and the American public.

The debate on how to properly regulate life sciences research is not new – nor is it easy to resolve. Scientists and policymakers have wrestled with these questions for decades. The debate goes back at least as far as the 1970's – when scientists discovered that DNA from different organisms could be combined together in a lab to create a pathogen not found in nature. When they realized the potential ramifications of this discovery, they agreed to pause such research until the risks and benefits could be thoroughly assessed.

Since then, experts have wrestled with other ethical issues in life sciences research – from cloning, to stem cell research, to modifying viruses. Those questions are more important than ever. We are living in a remarkable age of technological change and scientific progress. Laboratories are springing up all over the world, research areas are expanding, and money is pouring into this work from governments and private funders.

We have a responsibility to harness the energy and ingenuity of this moment. It will allow us to identify new vaccines, new treatments, and better tests for novel pathogens. New technologies will help us do research faster and safer, by modernizing lab experiments and getting more information from smaller quantities of pathogens.

To be clear, in this era of new research, there will be risks, and we have to protect the American public against them. But we also have to be smart and strategic as we do it. Setting reactionary

limits on federal research could have harmful consequences. Other countries could make crucial discoveries while our researchers are slowed by red tape. Private donors could keep funding research without the proper guardrails in place. We need to make sure that we maintain control of high-risk research – to ensure it's effective, innovative, and safe.

Science is an inherently human endeavor, and the question of what is "too risky" ultimately comes down to human judgment. There is no simple answer. But today's hearing – and our panel of expert witnesses – represent one important step in this work.

They will help us understand what transparency and oversight policies exist today for high-risk life sciences research – and what Congress should do to improve these measures and keep the American people safe. I thank them for being here today and look forward to our discussion.