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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

CHRISTOPHER R. HIXON, STAFF DIRECTOR  
MARGARET E. DAUM, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

May 5, 2017

The Honorable John F. Kelly  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
3801 Nebraska Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20016

The Honorable Thomas Price  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable James Mattis  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Kelly, Secretary Mattis, Secretary Price, and Secretary Perdue:

The mission of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is: “To enhance the economic and national security of America and promote more efficient, effective, and accountable government.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most serious threats our nation faces is the domestic release of a biological agent. Several bipartisan commissions have identified significant gaps in the nation’s biodefense capabilities that weaken the ability to protect citizens from biological events, whether natural like Zika or Ebola, or intentional like the 2001 anthrax attacks.<sup>2</sup> As you consider a national biodefense strategy, I write to urge you to develop a comprehensive and robust strategy for defending our nation from biological threats.

Most of the biodefense-focused commissions have urged the United States to place a higher priority on addressing biological threats through broad, interrelated recommendations. For example, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States expressed concern in 2004 about the number of terrorist groups pursuing chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear materials.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism urged the United States to place a higher priority on

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<sup>1</sup> See *Nomination of General John F. Kelly, USMC (Ret.), to be Secretary, U.S. Department of Homeland Security: Hearing before the S. Comm. on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 115th Cong.* (2017).

<sup>2</sup> See *infra* notes 2-4.

<sup>3</sup> Report, National Comm’n on Terrorist Attacks Upon the U.S., 9-11 Comm’n Report (2004), <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/>.

biological weapons non-proliferation and bioterrorism prevention in order to bring about substantial improvements in global biosecurity.<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, the Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense, chaired by former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge and former Senator Joe Lieberman, reported that the United States lacks a single Federal leader, a comprehensive national strategy, and a dedicated biodefense budget.<sup>5</sup> The panel also found that while the nation spends approximately \$6 billion each year on biodefense activities, the federal government has no complete accounting of those activities.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2017 (NDAA) requires your Departments to work jointly to develop a national biodefense strategy and associated implementation plan.<sup>7</sup> The NDAA provision is similar to legislation that I sponsored last Congress, the National Biodefense Strategy Act of 2016, which passed the Committee with bipartisan support.<sup>8</sup> In addition to requiring a national biodefense strategy, the legislation would have required the creation of a Biodefense Coordination Council and a federal biodefense expenditures report, echoing major findings of the Blue Ribbon Study Panel.

As your Departments work on the national biodefense strategy and associated implementation plan, I respectfully urge you to review the proposed legislation from last Congress and include the following elements in the national biodefense strategy:

1. Goals, priorities, and metrics to improve and strengthen the ability of the federal government to prevent, detect, respond to, and recover from a major biological incident;
2. Resource and capability gaps in the federal biodefense enterprise; and
3. A detailed accounting of investment dollars allotted by each of your Departments to support biodefense activities, including how these investments align with goals and priorities described in the strategy.

Additionally, I encourage you to make the national biodefense strategy a comprehensive guide for the nation that informs and harmonizes all other biodefense-related plans maintained by federal agencies.

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate to investigate “the efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of all agencies and departments of the Government.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, S. Res. 62 (115th Congress) authorizes the Committee to examine “the efficiency and economy of

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<sup>4</sup> Report, Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism Report Card (January 2010), <http://www.cfr.org/terrorism/world-risk-report-commission-prevention-wmd-proliferation-terrorism/p17910>.

<sup>5</sup> *A National Blueprint for Biodefense: Leadership and Major Reform Needed to Optimize Efforts*, BLUE RIBBON STUDY PANEL ON BIODEFENSE, Oct. 2015, available at <http://www.hudson.org/research/11824-a-national-blueprint-for-biodefense-leadership-and-major-reform-needed-to-optimize-efforts>.

<sup>6</sup> Id.

<sup>7</sup> Pub. L. No. 114-328

<sup>8</sup> S. 2967, 114th Cong. § 2 (2016)

<sup>9</sup> S. Rule XXV(k); see also S. Res. 445, 108th Cong. (2004).

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operations of all branches and functions of Government with particular references to (i) the effectiveness of present national security methods, staffing, and processes . . . .”<sup>10</sup>

I ask that you inform the Committee whether you will incorporate these elements into the national biodefense strategy no later than May 31, 2017. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact me or have your staff contact Dan Lips with the Committee staff at 202-224-4751.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson  
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Claire McCaskill  
Ranking Member

Enclosure

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<sup>10</sup> S. Res. 62 § 12, 115th Cong. (2017).