

**Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson**  
**“Assessing the State of Our Nation’s Biodefense”**

**Wednesday, October 28, 2015**

*As submitted for the record:*

Discussions about homeland security often involve the threats we can see: violent extremism, dirty bombs, explosives, nuclear weapons, etc. Today, we will be examining our nation’s defenses and preparedness for a threat that is not visible to the naked eye but that can threaten entire cities: biological agents such as the bacteria and viruses that cause anthrax, plague, tularemia and Ebola.

These pathogens are familiar to most of us. They, among others, have all previously been identified by the Department of Homeland Security as posing serious threats to our national security. They could potentially cause the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans if used as weapons. And these pathogens could be delivered in any number of frightening scenarios — some known and some unknown.

The impact could be widespread, and attacks could go on for days before the medical community notices. After authorities conclude an attack has taken place, stopping the perpetrators is no small task and one to which we are unaccustomed. Consider that in the case of the anthrax mailings of 2001, it took six years for the FBI to identify their chief suspect.

The natural threat from Mother Nature is equally unnerving. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation modeled what would happen today if influenza similar to the 1918 Spanish flu were to break out today. The global result: 33 million people could die within 250 days.

Last year, the Ebola outbreak tested our nation’s readiness to handle such threats. What started as a confident response quickly became shaky as several health care workers themselves became infected. Instead of patients being treated at any community hospital, they were transferred to just a handful of specialized facilities. Federal agencies were caught off-guard on medical countermeasure development, clinical guidelines, waste management and overall leadership.

We need to ask important questions: Are we ready for another natural infectious disease outbreak? Are federal agencies, together with state and local partners, ready to respond to a biological attack, the source of which may remain unknown for months or years? In a period of significant fiscal limitations, are funds being allocated most efficiently and effectively?

Whether the threat is an intentional weapon or an emerging infectious disease, our nation’s biodefense infrastructure needs to be effective from detection to attribution to recovery. Though we arguably have the greatest health care system in the world, we do not want to be overly confident about our ability to respond to these biological challenges. We need an adequate strategy and leadership to see it implemented.

I want to thank former Sen. Joe Lieberman and former Gov. Tom Ridge for joining us today. Sen. Lieberman and Gov. Ridge have co-chaired the Blue Ribbon Panel on Biodefense, which has been examining our biodefense infrastructure since last December. Their report, published today, is a testament to the hard work they and their staff have put into this important project. I look forward to their testimony.