

OPENING STATEMENT FOR CHAIRMAN RON JOHNSON
ARE WE PREPARED? PROTECTING THE U.S FROM GLOBAL PANDEMICS
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2020

As prepared for delivery:

The emergence of the novel coronavirus from Wuhan, China and its arrival on our doorstep shows the threat that pandemics pose to our nation. Already, around the world, this coronavirus has infected tens of thousands of people and killed hundreds. The virus is sparking investor anxiety and straining the global supply chains we depend on. I commend the hardworking professionals at the Federal, state, and local levels that are helping to slow the spread of this virus across the U.S. But the purpose of this roundtable is to examine our response to pandemics like the coronavirus and ask what more the federal government could be doing to combat the outbreak of global infectious diseases.

The Coronavirus is not the first of its kind, and it certainly will not be the last. Our experience includes the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, in 2002; the H1N1 influenza virus, in 2009; the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS, in 2012; and an outbreak of Ebola in 2014. In 2016, I sponsored the National Biodefense Strategy Act because it had become clear that the U.S.'s response to biological threats and diseases was disjointed. I hoped that the Federal government would develop a strategy clearly identifying "who's in charge?" of managing government-wide response efforts. We need clear roles and effective strategies in place before an outbreak hits our shores. Another piece of legislation, the 2018 National Biodefense Strategy, was a great start, but we need to focus on how it is implemented.

If we want to stop infectious diseases from becoming global problems, then we must ensure that our policies and procedures are thoughtfully developed and ready to go before the next infection crosses our borders. To achieve this goal, we must be able to answer some key questions:

First and foremost, who's in charge? We have learned that an effective response to a pandemic requires a whole-of-government approach: health officials who identify and treat the disease, homeland security officials who protect against infection, and a host of others. But our response is not effective if it is not well-managed.

Second, do we have clear strategies and plans to combat these global diseases and pandemics?

Third, what lessons have we learned from previous responses? Have we addressed and resolved those issues?

This roundtable is timely because of the recent outbreak of the Coronavirus, but these are important policy issues that will continue to be relevant. The American people need to be reassured that their government has learned the lessons of the past and is doing the best it can to protect them. I look forward to this discussion and thank our speakers for joining.