

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Rob Portman
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
& GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
“ADDRESSING THE GAPS IN AMERICA’S BIOSECURITY PREPAREDNESS”
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Thank you Chairman Peters for holding this hearing on addressing the gaps in our nation’s biosecurity preparedness. And thank you to the witnesses for your testimony today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need to examine the effectiveness and adequacy of our nation’s biosecurity posture. Biological threats can come in various forms - man-made, accidental, or naturally occurring pathogens – and can have a devastating impact on the nation or even the world as we have experienced over the past two years.

In the last 20 years, this country has seen attempts at biological terrorism, notably the anthrax attacks in 2001, as well as the threat caused by harmful pathogens ranging from H1N1, Ebola, and COVID-19.

Despite the clear threats, our nation’s biosecurity efforts have long been fragmented across several agencies, which hampers coordination to ensure that we are prepared for the next large scale biological hazard. I hope that we will talk about that today and about what more should be done to ensure that our country has the best biodetection capability and is making smart investments in research and development in this area.

The Department of Homeland Security’s Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office—or CWMD—has a significant role in our nation’s biosecurity mission. However, the CWMD Office is plagued with challenges, some of which are perennial and predate the formation of the office.

BioWatch is the primary biosecurity program at DHS, operated by the CWMD Office. Since its inception almost 20 years ago, BioWatch, has consistently underperformed and underdelivered on its intended purpose to detect harmful biological agents that pose a hazard to the public.

The American taxpayer has invested over \$1 billion into the BioWatch program. The CWMD Office now looks to upgrade and replace this program with a new biosecurity effort called “Biodetection for the 21st Century,” also known as “BD-21.” It is critical that DHS builds BD21 on a strong foundation of research and

testing to ensure it is a worthwhile investment and, more importantly, it is a system that can protect the American people from harmful biological threats.

The authorities of the CWMD Office are set to expire late next year. As this Committee considers reauthorization, I look forward to hearing all of our witnesses' assessments of the state of our nation's biosecurity preparedness and their recommendations for improving national efforts to safeguard the American people from these threats.