

Bioweapons Research:**Scientists wary of Bush pathogen science plan**

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2003 APR 21 - (NewsRx.com & NewsRx.net) – A Bush administration program to add at least three bioweapons labs is troubling many scientists and arms control experts, who say it can't be good to train more microbiologists in the black art of bioterror.

The field is suddenly awash with billions of dollars to combat bioterrorism and much more is promised under President Bush's Project BioShield plan. The money will fund a building boom of at least three new airtight **laboratories** where scientists in space suits handle the world's deadliest diseases.

At least six universities and the New York State Department of Health are competing for contracts to build one or two labs, where scientists can infect research monkeys and other animals with such lethal agents as the Ebola, Marburg and Lassa viruses. Those African hemorrhagic diseases are often fatal and always painful, marked by severe bleeding.

They'll also likely create new classes of toxins - including genetically engineered ones - as part of the process of constructing weapons they want to defeat. Developing antidotes or vaccines for those toxins might take years.

"It's perversely increasing the risk of exposure," said Richard Ebright, a Rutgers University chemistry professor and bioweapons expert who believes one additional lab is all that is needed.

Ebright and others believe labs managed by universities could prove less secure than government facilities, which have had their own **security** lapses.

Many believe the anthrax attacks that killed five people and briefly paralyzed Capitol Hill in 2001 were launched by a scientist with access to one of the government's high-**security** facilities - called Biosafety Level 4 labs, or BSL-4 for short.

Federal investigators searched a former apartment of one such microbiologist, Steven Hatfill, but never stated publicly that he was a suspect. Hatfill has denied involvement.

In his state of the union speech in January, President Bush called for nearly \$6 billion to make vaccines and treatments against potential bioterror pathogens. The National Institutes of Health bioterrorism budget, meanwhile, has increased 500% this year to \$1.3 billion - a large part of which will be used to build at least three labs.

Government officials and leaders of universities vying for the bioterrorism largesse are unapologetic.

NIH officials said that only two of the five U.S. facilities equipped to do such work are effectively in use today, and they're overburdened. One is at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta - the only place in the United States that handles live smallpox.

The other full-scale lab is the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of **Infectious** Diseases at Maryland's Fort Detrick. The government is already going ahead with additional labs at Fort Detrick and in Hamilton, Montana.

"What we have is not adequate to meet the current biodefense efforts," said Rona Hirschberg of the National Institute of Allergy and **Infectious** Disease.

Officials said they don't know how many scientists work in the biosafety labs, but that the number is tiny and many more trained researchers are needed.

One of the byproducts of such endeavors will be the study of emerging diseases like the West Nile **virus**, which has infected 4000 people and killed 274 in the U.S.

"The emerging diseases that we have to deal with are intense," said Virginia Hinshaw, provost of the University of California-Davis, which hopes to build one of the new labs. "The public health need is very large."

But mistrust runs deep, especially in the California college town of Davis. Lobbied intensely by vocal residents, the city council voted to oppose the school's application to build a lab.

The Davis protests reached a crescendo in February with the escape of a lab monkey, which is still missing. Davis officials said it was disease-free and probably is now dead. Still, the school's \$200 million bid for a BSL-4 lab has been jeopardized.

Government officials insist that the labs will be secure and serve only defensive purposes. But the U.S. military has a history of dabbling in biological agent programs that push up against a 30-year-old international treaty banning them.

Most recently, it was revealed that researchers at the Dugway Proving Ground in Utah have been developing anthrax for use in testing biological defense systems.

This article was prepared by Bioterrorism Week editors from staff and other reports.