Scientists say federal bioweapons push has big risks
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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) - There's never been a better time to be a microbiologist. The field is suddenly awash with billions of dollars to combat bioterrorism and much more is promised under President George W. 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 in Rome, New York, 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.

It's not just concerns over escaped research monkeys - as happened recently - and other heightened risks that killer germs could be mishandled that trouble scientists and weapons control advocates about this microbiology buildup. It's the prospect that even more U.S. researchers will be trained in the black art of bioterrorism.

Because researchers must first construct the weapons they want to defeat, they will likely create new classes of toxins - including genetically engineered ones - for which it might take years to develop antidotes or vaccines.

Many fear the proliferation of labs that once seemed the exclusive domain of such medical thrillers as "Outbreak" will increase the chances of germ attacks.

"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. "They're throwing money at problems that don't exist."

Ebright and others believe labs managed by universities could prove less secure than government facilities, which have had their own documented **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 U.S. 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, 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 percent this year to $1.3 billion - a large part of which will be used to build at least three BSL-4 labs.

Government officials and leaders of universities vying for the bioterrorism largesse are unapologetic about their desire to build more super-contained **laboratories**.

NIH officials say that only two of the five U.S. facilities equipped do such work are effectively in use today, and they're overburdened. One is at the 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, the NIH branch funding the new BSL-4 labs. Government officials say creating vaccines, antidotes and rapid diagnostic tools against biological weapons are high priorities.

Officials said they don't know how many scientists work in BSL-4 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 4,000 people and killed 274.

"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 a BSL-4 lab. "The public health need is very large for this."

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.

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 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. Examples include the construction of a Soviet-style germ bomb in a CIA project called Clear Vision and research into how to genetically engineer anthrax to be vaccine-resistant, said a former Clinton administration national **security** official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

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.

All of which makes some neighbors of the proposed labs nervous.

"This is bioterrorism research and it's inappropriate in a university setting," said Samantha McCarthy, a Davis environmental lawyer. "The lab will also be a **terrorist** target, which makes our community a target."

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On the Net:

UC Davis: http://www.ucdavis.edu

Lab opponents: http://www.simpalife.com/stopUCDBioLabNOW/contact.html

NIH Biodefense Research: http://www.niaid.nih.gov/biodefense

Fort Detrick: http://www.usamriid.army.mil