



Office of Science and Technology Policy
Executive Office of the President
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
Washington, DC 20502

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Contact: Bob Hopkins, OSTP
(202) 456-6098
Sandy Miller Hays, USDA
(301) 504-1636
Marian Emr, NIH
(301) 496-5924

INTERAGENCY WORKING GROUP TO FOCUS ON PRION RESEARCH

WASHINGTON, D.C., Sep. 21, 2004 -- Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman and Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson today announced creation of a federal interagency working group to identify gaps in scientific knowledge about abnormal prion proteins, believed to be the causative agent of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and other diseases, and promote coordination of prion research projects by federal agencies.

In July, USDA proposed creation of the working group to the Committee on Science, part of the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC). Administered by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), the NSTC has approved the working group, and will oversee its activities.

"Although a significant amount of research has been conducted worldwide on prions in the past decade, there are still many vital questions for which we don't have answers," said Dr. John H. Marburger III, OSTP director and NSTC Co-Chair. "The working group will help coordinate federal agency efforts to identify research needs, share resources and expertise to gain greater understanding in addressing this threat to public health."

BSE is a member of a group of fatal neurodegenerative disorders known collectively as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, or TSEs. Other TSEs include scrapie in sheep, transmissible mink encephalopathy, chronic wasting disease in deer and elk, and Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease in humans. The discovery of a link between BSE and a variant form of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease has raised concerns that chronic wasting disease, an infectious prion disease spreading among North American deer and elk, could pose a threat to livestock health.

"The Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences recently published a document providing guidance for a national prion research program," said Veneman. "Their key recommendations called for basic research to identify the structural features of prions, the mechanisms by which prions reproduce themselves, the mechanisms by which TSEs cause disease, and the physiological function of the normal prion protein. We believe that a coordinated research effort to address these types of crucial questions about abnormal prions and TSEs is the most effective route to understanding and dealing with the threat that these diseases pose for our wildlife, livestock and human population."

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"We are working hard to protect our country against BSE and TSE. An important part of our effort is to conduct research into its cause and in doing so we must work with our colleagues across the federal government," said HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson. "This new interagency working group provides us with a unique opportunity to catalyze research by sharing the perspectives and expertise of scientists throughout the Federal government to address an important national health concern."

The interagency working group will be composed of members nominated by federal agencies that have an interest in prion science. The group will meet regularly to discuss new scientific findings about prions, identify gaps in knowledge about these proteins, and communicate research needs to federal agencies so that they can consider carrying out specific prion-related projects.

About the National Science and Technology Council

The National Science and Technology Council (NSTC), a cabinet level council, is the principal means for the President to coordinate science, and technology policies across the Federal Government. NSTC acts as a "virtual" agency for science and technology to coordinate the diverse parts of the Federal research and development enterprise.

An important objective of the NSTC is the establishment of clear national goals for Federal science and technology investments in areas ranging from information technologies and health research to improving transportation systems and strengthening fundamental research. This council prepares research and development strategies that are coordinated across Federal agencies to form an investment package that is aimed at accomplishing multiple national goals.

To obtain additional information regarding the NSTC, contact the NSTC Executive Secretariat at (202) 456-6101

About the Office of Science and Technology Policy

Congress established OSTP in 1976 with a broad mandate to advise the President and others within the Executive Office of the President on the impacts of science and technology on domestic and international affairs. The 1976 Act also authorizes OSTP to lead an interagency effort to develop and to implement sound science and technology policies and budgets and to work with the private sector, state and local governments, the science and higher education communities, and other nations toward this end. The Director of OSTP serves as co-chair of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology and oversees the National Science and Technology Council on behalf of the President. For more information visit www.ostp.gov.

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