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ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Washington, DC 20515-6115

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March 27, 2007

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The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Two years ago, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report that pointed out deficiencies in our ability to adequately detect anthrax contamination in buildings in the event of a biological attack.¹ As part of that report, GAO made recommendations to agencies aimed at addressing deficiencies in sampling strategies and methods. Subsequently, at a hearing last year to determine what progress had been made toward implementing those recommendations, it became apparent that fundamental questions exist concerning leadership of, and responsibility for, planning and directing sampling activities for such events.² Simply put, the issue remains with respect to "who is in charge?" of these activities.

It has been two years since your original anthrax detection recommendations were made. We would like to determine what actions Federal agencies have taken to address both the recommendations made in your report and subsequent testimony, and to address the apparent uncertainty over leadership.

Specifically, we ask that the following questions be answered in the context of an anthrax attack where buildings are suspected of being contaminated:

1. Who is in charge of ensuring validation of sampling strategies and methods?

¹ GAO-05-251, "Anthrax Detection: Agencies Need to Validate Sampling Activities in Order to Increase Confidence in Negative Results."


² The hearing on May 9, 2006, before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, House Committee on Government Reform, was entitled "Anthrax Protection: Progress or Problems." GAO testimony at this hearing was GAO-06-756T "Anthrax: Federal Agencies Have Taken Some Steps to Validate Sampling Methods and to Develop a Next Generation Anthrax Vaccine."

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2. How are roles and responsibilities defined across agencies? What mechanisms are in place to ensure the leadership role is understood, direction is effectively communicated, and agencies take action? How is leadership different from coordination in this context?
3. What progress has been made toward developing a strategic plan and a roadmap outlining how individual agency efforts would lead to the validation of the overall sampling process?
4. Has a definition of validation been agreed on and has the overall process of sampling activities, including methods, been validated?
5. Have appropriate investments been made in empirical studies to develop probability-based sampling strategies?
6. Have appropriate, prioritized investments been made for all biothreat agents?

Should you have any questions concerning this request, please contact John Sopko, Chief Counsel for Oversight, at (202) 226-2424.

Sincerely,



John D. Dingell
Chairman



Bart Stupak
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

cc: The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable Ed Whitfield, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce