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The Honorable James R. Langevin

**Opening Statement – “Reducing Threats to our Nation’s Agriculture: Authorizing a
National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility”
May 23, 2007**

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats, Cybersecurity, and Science and Technology hearing on the need to reduce threats to our nation’s agriculture sector.

Today the subcommittee will receive testimony regarding the National Bio-and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF). We are all well aware that biological threats – both manmade and naturally occurring – present a real danger to the security of the United States. In previous hearings we have heard from experts on how best to protect against a variety of biological threats and how to strengthen programs, like BioShield, to effectively procure countermeasures. Today we will focus our attention on protecting against zoonotic diseases, which affect both animals and humans, and can be devastating to our agricultural sector.

The agriculture industry is a critical component of our economy, and is responsible for much of our nation’s food supply. We must therefore do everything possible to ensure its safety and security, and this includes strengthening our defenses against zoonotic diseases. Investing in research and development will yield new and innovative technologies and allow us to effectively combat these diseases. These advances will aid in our understanding of disease transmission and development of countermeasures to mitigate disease outbreaks.

For over 50 years, the Plum Island Animal Disease Center has served this nation as a key research facility for foreign animal diseases. That facility is now over half a century old, and both of the Departments represented here today agree that an upgraded facility is necessary. For years Plum Island was one of many animal disease research centers run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and it fulfilled a unique function partly due to its placement on an island off the U.S. mainland.

Current law, which dates back to 1948, requires that live foot and mouth disease virus must be studied on an island to protect against an outbreak on the U.S. mainland. This law has served us well through the years, but experts, including our witnesses today, believe that current containment technology is safe enough for this virus to be studied on the U.S. mainland within the confines of a proper facility.

Today we will hear from officials both from DHS and USDA on a proposal to change current law to allow for a National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility. The NBAF will be a new and secure facility – located on the mainland – capable of housing a broad range of zoonotic diseases. The NBAF will significantly enhance our knowledge of these agents and will advance our capability to produce effective countermeasures.

We have certainly seen the devastation that can be caused by the outbreak of zoonotic diseases, such as foot and mouth disease. The outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the United Kingdom in 2001 caused 2,000 cases of the disease in farms throughout the British countryside. To stop the spread of the disease, seven million sheep and cattle were killed, and altogether, the crisis is estimated to have cost Britain 8 billion pounds, the equivalent of \$15 billion.

This crisis emphasizes the ongoing need for foot and mouth disease research to provide vaccines and other countermeasures to protect the cattle, dairy, pork, and sheep industries. It also highlights the importance of having a state of the art facility with BioSafety Level 3 and 4 capabilities to ensure that the diseases studied there will not present a threat to the food and agriculture sectors of our economy. I believe that the proposed facility can meet these challenges, and I laud both the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Agriculture for their forward thinking on this issue.

As you know, the committee is currently working on a bill introduced by Ranking Member McCaul to authorize such a facility. I am a proud cosponsor of that legislation and I commend the Ranking Member for his leadership on this issue. The committee has been talking to our colleagues on the Committee on Agriculture, members of the administration represented by our witnesses today, and several professional organizations regarding the bill language. We appreciate the feedback of our experts, such as our witnesses here today, and we plan to have the bill ready for a markup in a few weeks. I thank the witnesses for being here and I look forward to your testimony.