

# United States Senate

November 8, 2023

The Honorable Monica Bertagnolli, M.D.  
Director  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, M.D. 20892

Dear Director Bertagnolli:

We are writing to learn more about potentially risky research at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Rocky Mountain Laboratories (RML) in Hamilton, Montana.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which experts in the intelligence community believe likely leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China,<sup>1</sup> every precaution must be taken to prevent such an avoidable tragedy from ever happening again.

During Dr. Anthony Fauci's tenure as director of NIAID, RML was expanded to include a Biosafety Level 4 (BSL-4) laboratory for research and experiments on deadly pathogens with pandemic potential, including the plague, Ebola, and Marburg, using live animals such as non-human primates, bats, and pigs.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "the microbes in a BSL-4 lab are dangerous and exotic, posing a high risk of aerosol-transmitted infections. Infections caused by these microbes are frequently fatal and without treatment or vaccines."<sup>5</sup> The Department of Health and Human Services states "access to BSL-4 laboratories is carefully controlled and requires significant training."<sup>6</sup>

Yet, as you are likely aware, RML previously reported a number of security protocol breaches in the past.<sup>7</sup> Unauthorized individuals, including a child, were found wandering near the RML primate facility.<sup>8</sup> A mouse that had been infected with Lassa fever virus, which is similar to Ebola and claims the lives of 5,000 people

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<sup>1</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Warren P. Strobel, "FBI Director Says Covid Pandemic Likely Caused by Chinese Lab Leak; Christopher Wray provides first public confirmation of bureau's classified assessment of suspected laboratory incident," Wall Street Journal, February 28, 2023; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fbi-director-says-covid-pandemic-likely-caused-by-chinese-lab-leak-13a5e69b>.

<sup>2</sup> "New WCW Investigation: Photos Show Max-Pain Ebola Tests on Baby Piglets at Fauci's expanding Virus Superlab," White Coat Waste Project, September 28, 2023; <https://blog.whitecoatwaste.org/2023/09/28/new-wcw-investigation-photos-show-max-pain-ebola-tests-on-baby-pigs-at-faucis-expanding-virus-superlab/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Rocky Mountain Laboratories," National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases website, May 26, 2023; <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/about/rocky-mountain-laboratories>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Integrated Research Facility at NIAID's Rocky Mountain Laboratories," National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) YouTube page, September 11, 2012; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgw25F2U6\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgw25F2U6_o).

<sup>5</sup> "Quick Learn Lesson: Recognizing the Biosafety Levels," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, <https://www.cdc.gov/training/quicklearns/biosafety/#tabs-10>.

<sup>6</sup> "Biosafety Levels," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website, November 13, 2015, <https://www.phe.gov/s3/BioriskManagement/biosafety/Pages/Biosafety-Levels.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> "Incident Reports from Rocky Mountain Laboratories," Bozeman Daily Chronicle, October 23, 2014; <https://bloximages.chicago2.vip.townnews.com/bozemandailychronicle.com/content/tncms/assets/v3/editorial/e/16/e16f693c-71d4-11e4-9b1c-5fde927d833b/546fc9ff4cb9f.pdf.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Troy Carter, "Reports from infectious disease lab in Montana show lax biosafety rules," Bozeman Daily Chronicle, November 23, 2014; [https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/health/reports-from-infectious-disease-lab-in-montana-show-lax-biosafety-rules/article\\_37cd76fa-72ea-11e4-9864-17a0c3c4ee87.html](https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/health/reports-from-infectious-disease-lab-in-montana-show-lax-biosafety-rules/article_37cd76fa-72ea-11e4-9864-17a0c3c4ee87.html).

every year,<sup>9</sup> escaped from a cage and roamed free before being recaptured the next day.<sup>10</sup> The CDC was not promptly alerted about the incident as required because RML officials “did not believe they needed to report the escaped rodent but later did when instructed to by CDC officials.”<sup>11</sup>

There is no room for error and no excuse for carelessness, since even a minor mishap can be catastrophic when dealing with dangerous biological agents, especially those with pandemic potential.

RML currently is spending \$125 million in COVID-19 funds constructing a “new vivarium facility” to support Biosafety Level 2 (BSL-2) animal “breeding, holding and experimental programs, as well as quarantine for animals destined for BSL-3 and BSL-4 studies in laboratories at RML,” according to NIH.<sup>12</sup> The new facility will expand the RML’s “capabilities for studies with exotic species,” including bats.<sup>13, 14</sup>

It was recently reported that under Dr. Fauci, RML infected Egyptian fruit bats procured from a Maryland zoo with a coronavirus obtained from China’s Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV).<sup>15</sup> One of the participants in this RML study was a key collaborator with the researchers who conducted the dangerous experiments on bat coronaviruses at the WIV.<sup>16</sup>

RML also has a long and ongoing history of collaborations with EcoHealth Alliance,<sup>17</sup> the virus-hunting group that steered U.S. taxpayer dollars into the Wuhan Institute for research on bat coronaviruses. EcoHealth violated NIH grant policies by not immediately notifying the agency when its subcontractor, WIV, enhanced coronaviruses and repeatedly refused requests to turn over key documents about those experiments, which could contain crucial clues about the origins of COVID-19.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Lassa fever,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, April 26, 2022;

<https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/lassa/index.html#:~:text=Lassa%20fever%20is%20named%20after,so%20these%20estimates%20are%20crude>.

<sup>10</sup> Alison Young, “New lab incidents fuel fear, safety concerns in Congress,” USA Today, September 22, 2014;

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/09/22/biolab-safety-incidents-lassa-fever-h7n9-burkholderia/15908753/>.

<sup>11</sup> Troy Carter, “Reports from infectious disease lab in Montana show lax biosafety rules,” Bozeman Daily Chronicle, November 23, 2014; [https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/health/reports-from-infectious-disease-lab-in-montana-show-lax-biosafety-rules/article\\_37cd76fa-72ea-11e4-9864-17a0c3c4ee87.html](https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/health/reports-from-infectious-disease-lab-in-montana-show-lax-biosafety-rules/article_37cd76fa-72ea-11e4-9864-17a0c3c4ee87.html).

<sup>12</sup> “Rocky Mountain Laboratories – Comparative Medicine Center (RCMC),” National Institutes of Health Office of Research Facilities, October 4, 2022; [https://orf.od.nih.gov/Construction/ORFSignatureProjects/Pages/Rocky-Mountain-Laboratories-%E2%80%93-Comparative-Medicine-Center-\(RCMC\).aspx](https://orf.od.nih.gov/Construction/ORFSignatureProjects/Pages/Rocky-Mountain-Laboratories-%E2%80%93-Comparative-Medicine-Center-(RCMC).aspx).

<sup>13</sup> “Rocky Mountain Laboratories – Comparative Medicine Center (RCMC),” National Institutes of Health Office of Research Facilities, October 4, 2022; [https://orf.od.nih.gov/Construction/ORFSignatureProjects/Pages/Rocky-Mountain-Laboratories-%E2%80%93-Comparative-Medicine-Center-\(RCMC\).aspx](https://orf.od.nih.gov/Construction/ORFSignatureProjects/Pages/Rocky-Mountain-Laboratories-%E2%80%93-Comparative-Medicine-Center-(RCMC).aspx).

<sup>14</sup> “News You Can Use: Construction Updates,” The NIH Catalyst, National Institutes for Health Intramural Research Program, January 28, 2022; <https://irp.nih.gov/catalyst/30/1/news-you-can-use-construction-updates>.

<sup>15</sup> Alexa Lardieri, “REVEALED: Anthony Fauci-run lab in MONTANA experimented with coronavirus strain shipped in from Wuhan a year BEFORE Covid pandemic began,” Daily Mail, October 31, 2023; <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-12693441/fauci-nih-infected-bats-camp-david-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>16</sup> van Doremalen N, Schäfer A, Menachery VD, Letko M, Bushmaker T, Fischer RJ, Figueroa DM, Hanley PW, Saturday G, Baric RS, Munster VJ. “SARS-Like Coronavirus WIV1-CoV Does Not Replicate in Egyptian Fruit Bats (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*),” *Viruses*. 2018 Dec 19;10(12):727. doi: 10.3390/v10120727. PMID: 30572566; PMCID: PMC6316779; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6316779/>.

<sup>17</sup> Iagaili AN, Briese T, Mishra N, Kapoor V, Sameroff SC, Burbelo PD, de Wit E, Munster VJ, Hensley LE, Zalmout IS, Kapoor A, Epstein JH, Karesh WB, Daszak P, Mohammed OB, Lipkin WI. Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus infection in dromedary camels in Saudi Arabia. *mBio*. 2014 Feb 25;5(2):e00884-14. doi: 10.1128/mBio.00884-14. Erratum in: *MBio*. 2014;5(2):e01002-14. Burbelo, Peter D [added]. PMID: 24570370; PMCID: PMC3940034; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3940034/>. McKee CD, Islam A, Rahman M, et al. Nipah Virus Detection at Bat Roosts after Spillover Events, Bangladesh, 2012–2019. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. 2022;28(7):1384-1392. doi:10.3201/eid2807.212614; [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/28/7/21-2614\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/28/7/21-2614_article).

Letko, M., Seifert, S.N., Olival, K.J. et al. Bat-borne virus diversity, spillover and emergence. *Nature Reviews Microbiology*, 18, 461–471 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41579-020-0394-z>.

<sup>18</sup> “NIH and EcoHealth Did Not Effectively Monitor Awards and Subawards,” Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General, January 2023; <https://oig.hhs.gov/oas/reports/region5/52100025.pdf>.

As recently as last year, RML cited EcoHealth as an active collaborator on research on cross-species transmission of coronaviruses from bats and other deadly pathogens.<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, we are deeply concerned NIH continues to invite this shady organization to collaborate, especially on pandemic prevention studies, since the group has thus far not prevented any pandemics, but may have caused one. Quite frankly, it sounds way too much like a bad sequel to a horror movie, featuring the same cast of characters and predictable plot.

We would, therefore, like to learn more about the RML's past, present, and future experimentation with select agents and dangerous pathogens as well as collaborations with EcoHealth Alliance.

Please provide the following information:

1. What is the RML's anticipated annual budget for the upcoming fiscal year and the last five fiscal years, including any supplemental or COVID-related funding?
2. What is the total number of live bats and other live animals currently held at RML, delineated by species?
3. What is the total number of live bats and other live animals expected to be housed at the expanded RML facility, delineated by species?
4. Where are RML's lab animals sourced from? Are bats or other animals being imported from foreign nations?
5. Are there any current or future RML projects that will involve EcoHealth Alliance or collaborators from the organization? List all past and current RML projects which include collaborators representing or affiliated with EcoHealth Alliance and describe the involvement.
6. Are there any future or pending RML projects that will involve researchers, laboratories, and other institutions and individuals based in the People's Republic of China? List all RML past, present, and planned projects that involve collaborations with researchers, laboratories, and other institutions and individuals based in the People's Republic of China and describe their involvement.
7. Will the renovated RML conduct gain-of-function research or any other type of experimentation enhancing the pathogenicity of infectious agents or creating chimeric versions? If so, how will Congress and the public be informed of any such experiments planned at RML?
8. How will Congress and the public be informed of proposed RML research involving select agents, defined by the CDC as "biological agents and toxins that have been determined to have the potential to pose a severe threat to public health and safety?"
9. Should any biosafety incidents at RML occur, how will Congress and the public be notified?
10. Please describe and detail all RML live bat or live non-human primate experiments and/or studies, before December 2019, involving a SARS-like virus or a chimera from a SARS-like virus. Please

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<sup>1</sup> "NIH Annual Intramural Research Report," project ZIA AI001179-10, NIH website, accessed October 30, 2023; <https://intramural.nih.gov/search/searchview.taf?ipid=126105&ts=1696342927&nidbreload=true>.

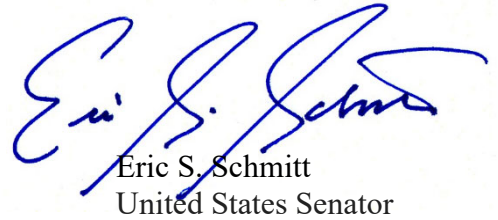
include the GenBank reference number for the virus(es) studied, or if the sequences remain unpublished, please explain why.

Thank you for your cooperation with this request and please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Joni K. Ernst  
United States Senator



Eric S. Schmitt  
United States Senator