

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 12, 2024

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We are disturbed by recent reports about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) collaboration with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-linked Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) on bird flu research. This research, funded by American taxpayers, could potentially generate dangerous new lab-created virus strains that threaten our national security and public health.¹

The USDA-CAS joint project description states that it entails "in vivo passage of viruses through mallard ducks and Chinese goose species to predict evolution in natural hosts," "viral evolution and transmission dynamics of avian influenza virus (AIV) infection in Japanese quail as an indicator species of potential to jump into mammalian hosts," and experiments with "highly pathogenic avian influenza."^{2,3}

USDA considers avian influenza viruses to be "select agents" that "have the potential to pose a severe threat to both human and animal health" and may be subject to research restrictions and enhanced oversight.⁴ Additionally, biosafety experts state that "serial passaging frequently resulted in gain-of-function (GOF) genome alterations" and "when serial passaging is conducted in animals, the likelihood of animal-to-human transmission, and thus, risk, may increase."⁵

Regarding the role of CAS in this potentially dangerous research collaboration, USDA explains: "The work will involve...wet-lab virology, both in vitro and in vivo...The collaborators at the Chinese Academy of Sciences will...perform in vivo and vitro fitness measurements...Chinese Academy of Science will provide molecular virology expertise." One of the key CAS collaborators in this USDA program has a recent affiliation with the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV).⁶

¹ Christenson, J. (2024, February 16). *Sen. Joni Ernst demands answers on Biden USDA's \$1m 'dangerous bird flu experiments' in China*. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2024/02/15/us-news/sen-joni-ernst-demands-answers-on-bidens-usda-spending-1m-on-dangerous-bird-flu-experiments-with-china/>

² "US-UK-China Collab: Predictive phylogenetics for evolutionary and transmission dynamics of newly emerging avian influenza viruses," Research Project 439621, Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture website, accessed February 21, 2024; <https://www.ars.usda.gov/research/project/?accnNo=439621>.

³ "US-UK-China Collab: Predictive Phylogenetics For Evolutionary and Transmission Dynamics of Newly Emerging Avian Influenza Viruses," Research Project 440252, Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture website, accessed February 21, 2024; <https://www.ars.usda.gov/research/project/?accnNo=440252>.

⁴ *Select agents and toxins list*. HHS & USDA Federal Select Agent Program. (2023, August 1). <https://www.selectagents.gov/sat/list.htm>

⁵ Caroline Schuerger, Stephanie Batalis, Katherine Quinn, et al., "Understanding the Global Gain-of-Function Research Landscape" (Center for Security and Emerging Technology, August 2023). <https://doi.org/10.51593/20220035>

⁶ Nieves, A. (2024, February 15). *WCW Investigation: \$1M USDA-CCP program soup up bird flu with Wuhan experimenter; Sen. Ernst demands answers*. White Coat Waste Project. <https://blog.whitecoatwaste.org/2024/02/15/wcw-investigation-1m-usda-ccp-program-soup-up-bird-flu-with-wuhan-experimenter-sen-ernst-demands-answers/>

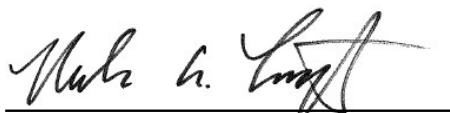
The CAS is the CCP-linked parent organization of the WIV. CAS is mentioned by name in the notice barring WIV from future U.S. government funding for blatantly violating grant and biosafety policies, refusing to share lab notebooks and other data, and otherwise obstructing investigations into the likely role of the lab's risky coronavirus GOF research in the origin of COVID-19.⁷ Recognizing the problematic behavior of CAS, our House and Senate colleagues have called for sanctions against CAS and its affiliates and for taxpayer funding to be cut for all research involving CAS.^{8,9}

Therefore, in the interest of safeguarding our public health and national security, we request written answers to the following questions about oversight of this project:

1. Do the serial passage experiments have the potential to enhance the pathogenicity or transmissibility of bird flu viruses?
2. Describe the specific roles and responsibilities of all collaborating institutions (including any sub-awardees) on the project.
3. Will data generated by the USDA be shared with CAS and vice versa? Please describe information sharing requirements and confidentiality guidelines of the project.
4. List all experiments being performed under this project, their locations, and the biosafety levels of the labs.
5. What biosafety oversight from USDA is provided over CAS collaborators and their bird flu lab experimentation?
6. Is the USDA-CAS avian flu project considered a "restricted experiment" that received prior approval from the Federal Select Agent Program? If not, why?
7. Did the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) perform a Security Risk Assessment of the USDA-CAS bird flu research collaboration? If so, when and what were the results? If not, why?

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and we look forward to your prompt response by May 30th, 2024.

Respectfully,

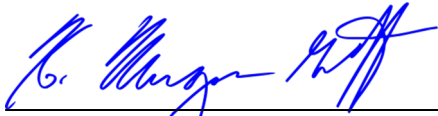


Nicholas A. Langworthy
Member of Congress

⁷ "Determination of Uncontested Suspension/Debarment," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 2023; <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Debarment.pdf>

⁸ Grassley, *Colleagues Introduce Bill to Sanction Beijing for Obstructing Investigations into Origins of Covid-19: U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa*. U.S. Senator Charles Grassley. (2022, January 11). <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-colleagues-introduce-bill-to-sanction-beijing-for-obstructing-investigations-into-origins-of-covid-19>

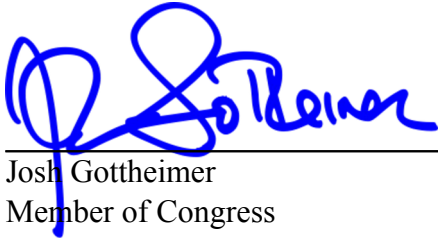
⁹ McCaul *releases addendum to origins of COVID-19 report*. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. (2021, August 2). <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/mccaul-releases-addendum-to-origins-of-covid-19-report/>



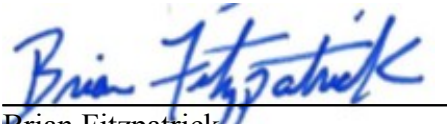
H. Morgan Griffith
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Austin Scott
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Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



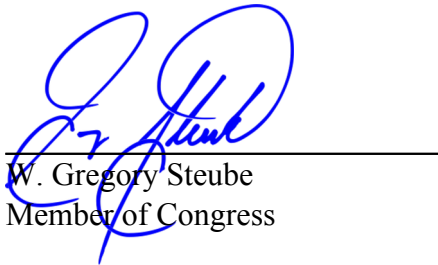
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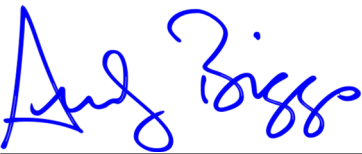
C. Scott Franklin
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Marcus J. Molinaro
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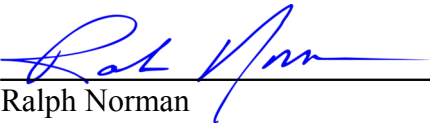
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