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ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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July 21, 2021

The Honorable Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D.
Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Collins,

According to its mission statement, a goal of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is “to exemplify . . . the highest level of scientific integrity and public accountability.”¹ However, under your leadership, the NIH is falling short of that goal. On March 18, 2021, we sent NIH a detailed, eleven-page request for information about origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, which the public deserves to see. Three months later, the NIH has refused to cooperate with that request. The NIH has not provided a single document to us or made any document available to the public that responds directly to the paramount question of whether NIH funding played a role in risky research in China that could have started the pandemic.

We specifically requested documents related to National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) grant R01AI110964, “Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence” to EcoHealth Alliance that in part funded the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) research into bat coronaviruses. The NIH has not provided the documents and did not provide written responses to any of the 29 questions in the March 18th letter. Instead, the NIH only provided a one-hour oral briefing to bipartisan committee staff with no documents to address any of the topics covered by the 29 questions in the March 18th letter. Additionally, no subject matter experts from the NIAID were included in the briefing, even though we specifically requested to hear from NIAID, which is the NIH institute responsible for issuing this grant. The only written response provided by the NIH was a two-page May 21, 2021, letter signed by NIH Principal Deputy Director Lawrence Tabak that did not address any of the questions in the March 18th letter, but instead stated:

¹ National Institutes of Health, *Mission and Goals*, What We Do (accessed July 14, 2021) available at <https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/what-we-do/mission-goals>.

The application [from EcoHealth Alliance] was subjected to rigorous peer review and did not propose research to enhance any coronavirus to be more transmissible or virulent. The research proposed in the grant application sought to understand how bat coronaviruses evolve naturally in the environment to become transmissible to the human population. This included studying viral diversity in bat reservoirs, surveying people who work in live animal markets or other jobs with high exposure to wildlife for evidence of bat-coronavirus infection, and analyzing data to predict which newly discovered viruses pose the greatest threat to human health. To support its work, EcoHealth made sub-awards to the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other institutions based in East Asia where coronaviruses tend to emerge and are prevalent. NIH is not currently funding the Wuhan Institute of Virology.²

In addition, the NIH has denied supporting “gain-of-function” research at the WIV through this NIAID grant. For example, NIAID Director Dr. Anthony Fauci testified, “The NIH has not ever and does not now fund gain-of-function research in the Wuhan Institute of Virology.”³ You also stated: “Let me be very clear, we never approved any grant that would have supported gain of function research on dangerous coronaviruses to see if they could be more transmissible or lethal for individuals in the human species.”⁴ Yet, the NIH has declined to produce the underlying grant documents and records to substantiate these assertions. Importantly, the NIH has not provided complete information about exactly what the NIH did support at the WIV.

Based on published reports over the last few months and the NIH’s June 28, 2021, briefing with bipartisan committee staff, we have reason to believe that the NIH may have funded humanized mice experiments at the WIV, and that such experiments may have had the potential to start the pandemic. This recent information seems contrary to NIH’s characterizations of the EcoHealth grant and WIV research at issue.

Further, recent documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) reveal that an NIAID official visited the WIV in 2017, and that NIAID had familiarity with the WIV research on bat coronaviruses and that some of these viruses could be transmissible to humans.

² NIH did not identify by name the “other institutions based in East Asia where coronaviruses tend to emerge and are prevalent” in its letter. The only institution (singular) other than the WIV reported by EcoHealth Alliance as a sub-grant recipient for this grant is the Wuhan University, the same institution from which a researcher requested NIH to remove its submissions to the NIH Sequence Read Archive (SRA) database and NIH removed them. Dr. Jesse Bloom of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center recovered some of the removed sequence data and determined that the sequences related to the SARS CoV-2 early Chinese COVID-19 patients.

³ Lori Robertson, *The Wuhan Lab and the Gain-of-Function Disagreement*, FactCheck.org (July 1, 2021) available at <https://www.factcheck.org/2021/05/the-wuhan-lab-and-the-gain-of-function-disagreement/>. We note collaborative projects between Dr. Ralph Baric of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the WIV, have produced research articles that describe Gain-of-Function research experiments when the WIV was technically funded through a USAID cooperative agreement facilitated by a consortium that included EcoHealth Alliance.

⁴ Samuel Chamberlain, NIH head accuses Rand Paul of ‘misinformation’ about US ties to Wuhan lab New York Post (May 14, 2021) available at <https://nypost.com/2021/05/14/nih-head-accuses-rand-paul-of-misinformation-about-us-ties-to-wuhan-lab/>.

NIAID indirectly continued to fund the WIV research despite concerns about biosafety practices at the WIV raised in 2018 State Department cables, which were based in part on the NIAID visit in 2017.

First, we note that the FY 2018 abstract for the EcoHealth Alliance NIAID “Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence” grant renewal openly discussed experiments with humanized mice. The abstract for the project declared that aim number three of the research project was to: “3. Test predictions of CoV inter-species transmission. Predictive models of host range (i.e. emergence potential) will be tested experimentally using reverse genetics, pseudovirus and receptor binding assays, and virus infection experiments across a range of cell cultures from different species and **humanized mice**.” (emphasis added).⁵ As noted by science writer Nicholas Wade, in such experiments, “laboratory mice, a cheap and ethical stand-in for human subjects, are genetically engineered to carry the human version of a protein called ACE2 that studs the surface of cells that line the airways.”⁶

Second, a recent article in Vanity Fair reported that the WIV and its bat coronavirus research director, Dr. Shi Zhengli, were involved with experiments in humanized mice in recent years. The article stated that “Shi’s own comments to a science journal, and grant information available on a Chinese government database, suggest that in the past three years her team has tested two novel but undisclosed bat coronaviruses on humanized mice, to gauge their infectiousness.”⁷

Third, such experiments have pandemic potential. As the EcoHealth Alliance wrote in the FY 2019 abstract for this same NIH grant, “We will use S protein sequence data, infectious clone technology, in vitro and in vivo infection experiments and analysis of receptor binding to test the hypothesis that % divergence thresholds in S protein sequences predict spillover potential.”⁸ Mr. Wade further explained the implications of this research:

What this means, in non-technical language, is that Shi set out to create novel coronaviruses with the highest possible infectivity for human cells. Her plan was to take genes that coded for spike proteins possessing a variety of measured affinities for human cells, ranging from high to low. She would insert these spike genes one by one into the backbone of a number of viral genomes (“reverse genetics” and “infectious clone technology”), creating a series of chimeric viruses. These chimeric viruses would then be tested for their ability to attack human cell cultures (“in vitro”) and humanized mice (“in vivo”). And this information would help

⁵ Grantome NIH, Abstract for Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence, EcoHealth Alliance Inc. FY 2018 available at <https://grantome.com/grant/NIH/R01-AI110964-05>.

⁶ Nicholas Wade, *The origin of COVID: Did people or nature open Pandora’s box at Wuhan?*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, (May 5, 2021). available at <https://thebulletin.org/2021/05/the-origin-of-covid-did-people-or-nature-open-pandoras-box-at-wuhan/>.

⁷ Katherine Eban, *The Lab Leak Theory: Inside the Fight to Uncover COVID 19’s origins*, Vanity Fair (June 3, 2021), available at <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/06/the-lab-leak-theory-inside-the-fight-to-uncover-covid-19s-origins>.

⁸ Grantome NIH, Abstract for Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence, EcoHealth Alliance Inc. FY 2019 available at <https://grantome.com/grant/NIH/R01-AI110964-05>.

predict the likelihood of “spillover,” the jump of a coronavirus from bats to people.

The methodical approach was designed to find the best combination of coronavirus backbone and spike protein for infecting human cells. The approach could have generated SARS2-like viruses, and indeed may have created the SARS2 virus itself with the right combination of virus backbone and spike protein.⁹

From his review of WIV research, Dr. Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist and biosafety expert at Rutgers University, stated, “It is clear that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was systematically constructing novel chimeric coronaviruses and was assessing their ability to infect human cells and human-ACE2-expressing mice.”¹⁰ He further stated, “It is also clear that, depending on the constant genomic contexts chosen for analysis, this work could have produced SARS-CoV-2 or a proximal progenitor of SARS-CoV-2.”¹¹

Even Dr. Peter Daszak, the President of EcoHealth Alliance, noted the humanized mice and the risks of this research in a December 2019 interview.¹² Around minute 28 of the interview, Dr. Daszak stated:

And we have now found, you know, after 6 or 7 years of doing this, over 100 new SARS-related coronaviruses, very close to SARS. Some of them get into human cells in the lab, some of them can cause SARS disease in humanized mice models and are untreatable with therapeutic monoclonals and you can’t vaccinate against them with a vaccine. So, these are a clear and present danger....¹³

Likewise, Dr. Steven Quay noted the unique characteristic of efficient human-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in his testimony before the June 29, 2021, House Republican Forum that the SARS CoV-2 virus was “highly adapted for infection of humans from the start, unlike prior natural zoonoses. And growth in humanized mice would allow this lab [adaptation],”¹⁴ like in a March 2020 published paper by Dr. Ralph Baric of University of North Carolina and Dr. Shi of the WIV.

Fourth, the NIH in the June 28, 2021, staff briefing acknowledged that the NIH-funded research at the WIV involved mice. One of the two NIH briefers, Dr. Tabak stated that the only animals that were used in this NIH-funded research at the WIV were mice. However, to date, the

⁹ Wade, note 5.

¹⁰*Id.*

¹¹*Id.*

¹² Vincent Racaniello, *TWiV 615: Peter Daszak of EcoHealth Alliance - YouTube*, This Week in Virology, (May 19, 2020), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=IdYDL_RK--w.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Led By Science: The COVID-19 Origin Story: Forum Before Select Subcomm. on the Coronavirus Crisis, H. Comm. on Oversight & Reform, 117th Cong. (June 29, 2021) (statement by Dr. Steven Quay).

NIH has not clarified to the Committee whether the mice used in the NIH-supported research were *humanized* mice.

Fifth, humanized mice have not been ruled out as an intermediate animal host. According to the World Health Organization joint study with China, more than 80,000 animal samples were tested with no positive results for either SARS CoV-2 antibodies or for the virus itself in an attempt to identify the intermediate animal host to support the zoonotic origins theory.¹⁵ There is no evidence that any of these samples included samples of humanized mice at the WIV.

Finally, on October 26, 2017, Dr. Ping Chen, the Director of the NIAID office in China located in the U.S. embassy in Beijing, wrote to several NIAID officials stating that earlier in the week she had visited the P4 lab at the WIV and that her contact who helped arrange the visit was Dr. Zhengli Shi, “who is a Chinese collaborator on a NIAID grant to EcoHealth for SARS like corona virus project.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, the rest of this email and the trip report were redacted. But, in an April 15, 2020, email sent to Gray Handley of the NIAID with the subject “FW: 2018 Cable” with the January 2018 State Department cable attached, Dr. Chen stated: “Rick forwarded the cable. I was listed as a drafter. About half of the content was taken from my summary.”¹⁷ The January 2018 State Department cable discussed the BSL-4 lab at the WIV, China investing in infectious disease control, unclear guidelines on virus access, the lack of trained talent impeding research, and despite limitations, WIV researchers produce SARS discoveries. For the last topic, the cable noted the WIV research finding “strongly suggests that SARS-like coronaviruses from bats can be transmitted to humans to cause SARS-like disease.”¹⁸ These redacted documents provide a reason to believe that the NIH – or at least the NIAID – had a much higher level of engagement and familiarity with the EcoHealth Alliance grant and WIV bat coronavirus research than just reading press reports during April-July 2020 as NIH suggested at the June 28, 2021, briefing with bipartisan Committee staff.¹⁹

Over 600,000 Americans have died from COVID-19 and more than 4 million people worldwide. We need answers to some basic questions about the origin of the virus, and yet, the NIH continues to frustrate our efforts to get answers. The stakes are too high to operate on an

¹⁵ World Health Organization, *WHO-convened Global Study of the Origins of SARS-CoV-2* (March 30, 2021) available at <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus/origins-of-the-virus>.

¹⁶ Judicial Watch, *Judicial Watch: New Documents Show Wuhan Lab Asked NIH Official for Information on Disinfectants; Nine Fauci Agency Grants for EcoHealth Bat Coronavirus Research*, Press Releases (July 8, 2021) available at <https://www.judicialwatch.org/press-releases/wuhan-lab-fauci-grants/>.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Josh Rogin, *Opinion: State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses*, The Washington Post (April 14, 2020) available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/state-department-cables-warned-safety-issues-wuhan-lab-studying-bat-coronaviruses/>.

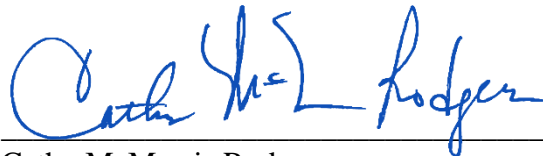
¹⁹ Based on the questions the NIH Office of Extramural Research asked EcoHealth Alliance, it is unclear that NIH maintained control, oversight or responsibility of EcoHealth Alliance as its grantee. For example, in an April 2020 email to EcoHealth Alliance, the NIH Deputy Director of Extramural Research, Dr. Michael Lauer, asked EcoHealth Alliance for information about this same grant, to include, “...it would be helpful for us to know about *all* China-based participants in this work since the Type 1 grant started in 2014 - who they were and how much money they received.”

honor system. This not only undermines NIH's mission goals, but also Congress' and the public's trust in the NIH. It is time for the NIH to share all information and documents that it has related to NIAID grant R01AI110964 with the public and the scientific community.

Therefore, we request that the NIH provide all documents related to the October 2017 visit to the WIV, all documents related to NIAID grant R01AI110964, and the identities of the "other institutions" referenced in NIH's May letter by July 28, 2021. In addition, we request staff briefings immediately and no later than July 28, 2021, with the following officials from NIAID: Dr. Ping Chen and Dr. Erik Stemmy, the program officer for NIAID grant R01AI110964.

If you have any questions, please contact Alan Slobodin or Diane Cutler of the Minority Committee staff.

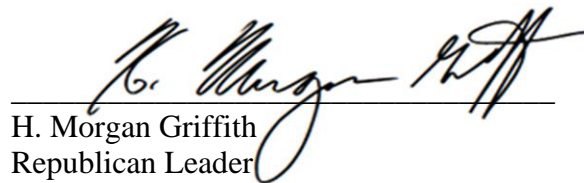
Sincerely,



Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Republican Leader
Committee on Energy and Commerce



Brett Guthrie
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Health



H. Morgan Griffith
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

CC: The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chairman
The Honorable Anna Eshoo, Chair, Subcommittee on Health
The Honorable Diana DeGette, Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations