Bidding for Biohazards:

The Madness of Bushenomics

Stan Cox

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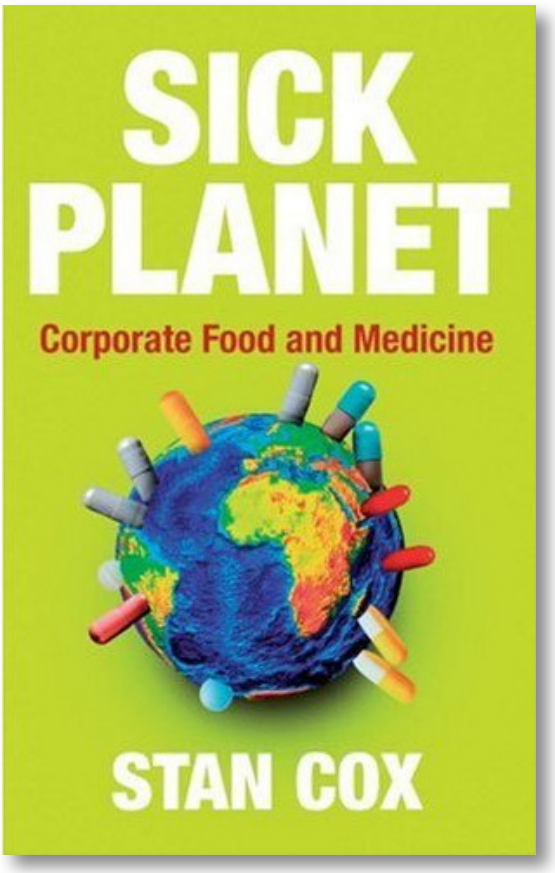

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BIDDING FOR BIOHAZARDS: STAN COX

What would it take to convince you that your town should play host to the world's most feared human and animal pathogens? Believe it or not, five states are locked in fierce competition over a proposed bioterror lab that would have them doing just that.

In 2002, the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was given control of Plum Island Animal Disease Center in New York. Now DHS is seeking a home in the heartland for a National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) that would take over Plum Island's work, along with its potent microbial cultures. The fact that many diseases are now known to jump between humans and animals, combined with this decade's terror-fixation, has led the federal government to convert the agricultural problem of sick livestock into the national-security problem of bioterrorism.

Lying off the east end of New York's Long Island, Plum Island (which was under the Department of Agriculture until 2002) is the only place in the nation where scientists have previously been allowed to handle the pathogens that cause foot-and-mouth disease, rinderpest, Rift Valley fever, African swine fever, and other horrific maladies that, if let loose on the mainland, could cause billions in agricultural losses and even threaten human populations.

NBAF will be a "biosafety level 4" (BL-4) facility, providing the highest degree of isolation for the world's most dangerous organisms (Plum Island was one notch down, at BL-3, because it was isolated by water). Locations being eyed as possible sites include the University of Georgia campus in Athens; the campus of Kansas State University in Manhattan; Flora, Mississippi, near the capital city of Jackson; a research farm 17 miles northeast of Duke University in North Carolina; and a former ranch near San Antonio, Texas.

There is cutthroat competition for the lab, with DHS being courted with the kinds of incentives that go to all big potential employers. The University of Georgia has offered 66 acres of prime real estate worth $15 million and $4.5 million in road and utility improvements. The Kansas Senate approved the issue of $164 million in bonds to pay for land, roads, and security for NBAF. Now, DHS is reportedly demanding that the lab, wherever it is sited, have its own energy source, a natural gas-fired power plant. Governor Kathleen Sebelius immediately agreed to throw that into the Kansas bid.

A Big Bio-gamble

Every potential location for the bioterror facility lies close to large human and animal populations. In Manhattan, Kansas, for example, the lab would be located not only in an agricultural region, and not only in the nation's second most tornado-prone state, but also within hailing distance of a senior-citizen home, a student housing area, an affordable-housing complex, a student recreation facility, a football stadium, and a basketball arena.

Kansas State University biology professor Walter Dodd will be have the new bioterror lab a mile north of his workplace if his state wins the sweepstakes. He says that in the struggle over the lab, it's impossible to compare risks. "There has been no formal risk assessment of the BSL-4 facility that is available to the public. Likewise, knowing the risk from terrorists introducing new pathogens is difficult." Although, he says, "We need to do this type of research because we must control diseases if possible," he worries about the proposed locations: "Putting the facility near a city or agricultural production strips one level of protection away." Dodd has recommended putting the lab in a desert or back on Plum Island.

Last year, DHS held a series of public meetings at the five candidate sites for the lab, soliciting comment on environmental, health, safety, and socioeconomic issues. The Department compiled almost 4000 such comments, the majority of them apparently negative. Residents raised a host of alarms about accidents, sabotage, natural disasters, ecosystem damage, water contamination, human or animal epidemics, use of the lab for secret, sinister research, and the general ineptitude of DHS. The Department is working on its responses.

When the bioterror lab is awarded to one of the five contenders this fall, residents of the "winning" location will be asked to accept such vaguely defined risks in good patriotic spirit, to protect the nation's cities, towns, pastures, and feedlots from a hypothetical terrorist attack. But the facility will be run by administrators drawn

from the same pool as those who responded to the only actual bioterror attack in this country to date – the anthrax mailings of October, 2001 – and who have made virtually no progress in solving them.

Furthermore, as I argued on the CounterPunch site in 2004, any agroterrorists who might want to see their mission accomplished in rural America need only sit back and watch. Agrocapitalism is already doing their work for them: poisoning water supplies, releasing antibiotic-resistant, highly pathogenic bacteria into streams and dust clouds, and contaminating our food supply.

Even bioterror alarmists admit that the increasing concentration of U.S. agriculture, and its increasingly industrial infrastructure, are precisely what make it more vulnerable. The U.S. Government's General Accounting Office acknowledged in a 2005 report that:

> The highly concentrated breeding and rearing practices of our livestock industry make it a vulnerable target for terrorists because diseases could spread rapidly and be very difficult to contain. For example, between 80 and 90 percent of grain-fed beef cattle production is concentrated in less than 5 percent of the nation's feedlots. Therefore, the deliberate introduction of a highly contagious animal disease in a single feedlot could have serious economic consequences.

The GAO didn't go on to discuss the damage that can be done by such a highly concentrated farming system even if terrorists never cast their shadow onto the churned soil of the American Plains. And now the federal government plans to take a laboratory that harbors some of the planet's most menacing animal and human germs and place it closer than ever to the cattle feedlots and slaughterhouses of Kansas or Texas, the hog-confinement facilities of North Carolina, or the vast poultry operations of the Deep South.

Critics charge that bioterror-lab boosters at the universities contending for NBAF have nothing but visions of fat grants dancing in their heads. Vigorous opposition in Columbia, Missouri and Madison, Wisconsin got those cities taken off the list of potential sites. Last spring, when Columbia was still in contention for the lab, Eddie Adelstein, an associate professor of pathology at the University of Missouri and the county's Interim Medical Examiner, wrote that his university was:

> Developing a corporate structure to allow us to furnish our own income, ignore the needs of the state and pay our top-level executives CEO wages ... To achieve ... financial independence, members of the local welcoming com-

> mittee for the proposed research center are willing to risk the life of every man, women, child, dog, cat, horse, cow and chicken in our homeland ... Yielding to their self-imposed pressure to become fiscally independent, these leaders in business and education have and are attempting to lure to Columbia a high-tech government facility that belongs in a safer place. The desires of economic growth have overridden all aspects of science and common sense. They would place this facility near homes, schools and nursing facilities ... When accidents occur, we would provide interesting but frightful data as these organisms have a predilection for children, older adults or just young people.

Dismal track records

BSL-4 laboratory capacity in the U.S., its growth once tightly restricted, is now slated to increase tenfold in coming years. BSL-3 labs, already numbering more than 600, will also proliferate. With a new lab in operating in Boston and the proposed NBAF together employing 900 people, and with hundreds more scientists and staff needed at other new facilities, shortages of employees highly trained in biosafety will become critical. A group of 19 experts convened in 2006 as a High Containment Biodefense Research Forum concluded that the influx of new bioterror research workers "will strain the current national capacity for biosafety training", that "many researchers will be working on potentially lethal organisms for the first time," and they "will not be accustomed to the risks of infection ... "

Past infectious-agent mishaps have often been the result of human error rather than equipment or facility breakdown. In the Forum, there was great concern that excessive trust in technology would lead to accidents in the new labs. One participant said, "I fear that some of our researchers believe that the engineering controls will provide their safety. And yet ... it's the procedural controls and the practices of biosafety within the laboratory that are most critical in maintaining good safety."

Government-run biodefense labs do not have a good record of keeping germs contained. The Animal Disease Center on Plum Island, separated from the mainland by several miles of water, was considered for many years to be a safe place to handle exotic pathogens. But as Michael Christopher Carroll related in his 2004 book *Lab 257: The Disturbing Story of the Government's Secret Germ Laboratory,* Plum Island suffered a long string of potentially disastrous accidents, including the escape of the foot-and-mouth pathogen from containment areas in 1978.

That fiasco led to the slaughter of all livestock on the island. Carroll's stomach-churning account of the killing, dismemberment, and incineration of hundreds of

goats, sheep, horses, and pigs – nonstop through an entire bloody weekend – provides a preview of what might be necessary if pathogens escape from a heartland NBAF. (And with an urban lab, human quarantine could well follow.) Carroll added the astonishing revelation that researchers took the risk of saving 60 sheep from the slaughter during the "kill weekend", so that they could be inoculated in the open air with the Rift Valley fever virus – a germ far more dangerous to humans than is foot-and-mouth.

Carroll relates how that incident was only one of many low points in Plum Island's dirty history. He even provides good circumstantial evidence, short of proof, that the pathogens causing Lyme disease and West Nile virus leaked out of Plum Island to become endemic on the U.S. mainland.

In 2006, the Frederick, Maryland News-Post revealed that the U.S. Army's top biodefense lab at nearby Fort Detrick had been plagued with germ escapes since 2001, when an Army technician was exposed to anthrax spores that had somehow reached her outside the containment area. That prompted a search, and the highly pathogenic Ames strain of anthrax was found around an ultraviolet sterilization box, an office, and an employee changing room.

It's not hard to see how contamination might have occurred. An Army safety specialist testified that in one instance, "I went into a virology suite one day. He (no name specified) went through the hot change room stark naked carrying two library books and a bottle of Pepsi. I went in through the change room and found him sitting in the office drinking the Pepsi and wearing scrubs. I informed the individual that the Pepsi and the books from Frederick County Library should not have come in through the hot area ..."

More anthrax spores turned up on the base in 2005, in an elevator and hallway and on a telephone. The News-Post found that the lab filed 161 biological-defense mishap reports just between 2002 and 2005. Accidents involved anthrax and SARS, and lab personnel have been infected with some pretty exotic germs: glanders, Q fever, vaccinia, Venezuelan equine encephalitis, and chikungunya. As an Army safety officer told the paper, "People can get complacent. Familiarity breeds complacency." In the words of another spokesperson, "People are people and there will be some degree of human error no matter where you work."

Texas A&M University lost its chance to host NBAF when it was hit with a Centers for Disease Control reprimand for unreported lab-safety foul-ups. The letter cited missing vials of infectious diseases and lab-worker exposure to the pathogens that cause brucellosis and Q-fever.

Finally, according to the Biodefense Research Forum, many past mistakes and

mishaps in biosafety labs have never been reported, because those involved had their funding and reputations to protect.

Playing Both defense and offense

The Agriculture Department, the U.S. Army, and a university were running the labs that committed the blunders described above. If states competing to host the NBAF expect better performance from the Department of Homeland Security – the outfit that covered itself in shame with its handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster – they are probably asking too much.

All of the nation's bioweapons work is by definition "defensive", but in the national-security realm, the mechanics of defensive and offensive research are often indistinguishable. Under both the Clinton and Bush administrations, the U.S. has resisted any upgrading of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention by which 158 nations, including the U.S., agreed not to develop offensive capacity. Since 2001, U.S. officials have moved forcefully to block any moves toward effective inspection protocols. A 2003 analysis by Nicole Deller and John Burroughs in World Policy Journal reported that "critics of the administration's policy speculate that the main reason for the opposition to the protocol may be that the United States is reluctant to open its biodefense program-which includes activities kept secret for years-to public scrutiny."

It's no secret why the government doesn't want public scrutiny: Its "biodefense" labs have stretched the definition of "defense" to include of 9/11, the New York Times' Judith Miller and two colleagues revealed that Pentagon researchers had developed plans to breed an extra-virulent strain of the anthrax bacterium; had built and tested a "germ bomb"; and had built a bioweapons lab in the Nevada desert out of materials bought on the open market. (Unlike Miller's erroneous reports on nonconventional weapons in Iraq, this report was not debunked.) As one senior official told the reporters, the Pentagon "was pressing how far you go before you do something illegal or immoral."

Given the thick curtain of secrecy that DHS will be allowed to draw around the proposed NBAF's laboratories, its research could well be pushed far beyond those legal and moral boundaries, and no one would be the wiser – especially not the people who work or live in that unlucky neighborhood that finally wins the germ jackpot.