

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 2, 2021

David Christian Hassell, Ph.D.
Senior Science Advisor
Office of the Assistant Secretary
for Preparedness and Response
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Dr. Hassell:

Americans deserve answers about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken millions of lives and destroyed many more. Mounting evidence suggests that research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, partially supported by U.S. taxpayer dollars, may have been the origin of the pandemic. Because you chair the group within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) responsible for reviewing funding decisions for research involving deadly pathogens,¹ we request your assistance in better understanding how U.S. taxpayer dollars could fund dangerous research at an unsafe Chinese laboratory.

In October 2014, the federal government paused the release of federal funds for “gain of function” research—that is, research with the potential to “enhance the pathogenicity or transmissibility of potential pandemic pathogens (PPPs).”² The pause contained an exception, however, “if the head of the [U.S. Government] funding agency determine[d] that the research [was] urgently necessary to protect the public health or national security.”³ In 2017, the Obama Administration lifted the pause on funding for gain of function research as long as the funding agency established a mechanism to review and appropriately evaluate these funding decisions.⁴ Accordingly, HHS established the Potential Pandemic Pathogen Care and Oversight (P3CO) Review Committee to review and evaluate funding decisions for HHS components.⁵

Between 2014 and 2019, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)—a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) within HHS and led by Dr. Anthony Fauci—awarded grants around \$600,000 per year to EcoHealth Alliance, Inc., to study

¹ Meeting of the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity in Bethesda, Md. (Jan. 23, 2020) (presentation of Dr. David Christian Hassell) [hereinafter “Hassell NSABB statements”].

² Nat’l Insts. of Health, Gain of Function Research, <https://osp.od.nih.gov/biotechnology/gain-of-function-research/>; see also White House Office of Science & Technology, U.S. Government Gain-of-Function Deliberative Process and Research Funding Pause on Selected Gain-of-Function Research Involving Influenza, MERS, and SARS Viruses (Oct. 17, 2014) [hereinafter “OSTP Gain-of-Function Pause”].

³ OSTP Gain-of-Function Pause, *supra* note 2. See also Nicholas Wade, *Origin of COVID — Following the Clues*, Medium.com, May 2, 2021.

⁴ See White House Office of Science & Technology, Recommended Policy Guidance for Departmental Development of Review Mechanisms for Potential Pandemic Pathogen Care and Oversight (P3CO) (Jan. 9, 2017).

⁵ See Andrew Kerr, *US grant to Wuhan lab to enhance bat-based coronaviruses was never scrutinized by HHS review board, NIH says*, Daily Caller News Foundation (Apr. 4, 2021).

David Christian Hassell, Ph.D.

June 2, 2021

Page 2

Chinese bat coronaviruses.⁶ EcoHealth's grants helped to fund research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology,⁷ a biosafety level 4 facility where U.S. diplomats reported safety and training deficiencies in 2018.⁸ In secret cables, these diplomats even warned that the Wuhan lab's work on bat coronaviruses and their transmission to humans posed a risk of starting a SARS pandemic.⁹

There is mounting evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may have originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology with research on bat coronaviruses partially funded by EcoHealth's grant. EcoHealth's president has bragged about the company's experience manipulating bat coronaviruses, saying the viruses can be modified in a lab "pretty easily."¹⁰ In addition, we now know that three researchers from the Wuhan lab sought hospital care in November 2019 "with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illness."¹¹ The timing of these illnesses matches scientists' best estimates for when SARS-CoV-2, the virus that caused the pandemic, began circulating the city of Wuhan.¹² The Chinese Communist Party, however, maintains that the first illness was not reported until December 8, 2019.¹³

The Trump Administration was rightly concerned enough about the EcoHealth grants that it directed the NIH to terminate the funding in April 2020.¹⁴ But questions still remain about how the U.S. government could use taxpayer dollars to fund research on dangerous pathogens at a Chinese lab with known safety deficiencies.

You have publicly admitted that the scope of the P3CO's review is "too narrow" and you seemed to imply that certain funding decisions were not brought before the P3CO.¹⁵ In comments to the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity in January 2020, you explained:

⁶ Grant from the U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., Nat'l Inst. of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, to EcoHealth Alliance Inc., 2R01AI110964-06 (July 24, 2019); Grant from the U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., Nat'l Inst. of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, to EcoHealth Alliance Inc., 5R01AI110964-05 (June 18, 2018); Grant from the U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., Nat'l Inst. of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, to EcoHealth Alliance Inc., 5R01AI110964-04 (May 26, 2017); Grant from the U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., Nat'l Inst. of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, to EcoHealth Alliance Inc., 5R01AI110964-03 (July 22, 2016); Grant from the U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., Nat'l Inst. of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, to EcoHealth Alliance Inc., 5R01AI110964-02 (June 10, 2015); Grant from the U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., Nat'l Inst. of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, to EcoHealth Alliance Inc., R01AI110964 (June 1, 2014).

⁷ Kerr, *supra* note 5.

⁸ Josh Rogin, *State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses*, Wash. Post, Apr. 14, 2020.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Kerr, *supra* note 5.

¹¹ Michael R. Gordon, Warren P. Strobel, & Drew Hinshaw, *Intelligence on sick staff at Wuhan lab fuels debate on COVID-19 origin*, Wall St. J., May 23, 2021.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Kerr, *supra* note 5.

¹⁵ Hassell NSABB statements, *supra* note 1.

There is a feeling that the scope of the [P3CO] framework is too narrow. Today, we've only been dealing with influenza-related proposals. . . . [A]ll these things, they start out with very broad . . . policies, . . . and the PPP is one very narrow area of that, which has resulted in only getting a few influenza-related proposals. I'll just probably be more frank than may be appropriate, I think that's too narrow. So what is the reason for that? Maybe I'm wrong, maybe there is more research that's going on out there—I'm sorry, maybe there is research that is not going on out there—but I think that can be revisited. And again it may be some definition issues. . . . But again, can we do more to define the scope?¹⁶

Although Dr. Fauci and NIH allege that EcoHealth's research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology was not gain of function research,¹⁷ and therefore not subject to P3CO review,¹⁸ other scientists disagree. Rutgers University Professor Richard Ebright told the *Daily Caller News Foundation* that Dr. Fauci's office "systematically thwarted—indeed systematically nullified—the HHS P3CO Framework by declining to flag and forward proposals for review."¹⁹ As an example, Professor Ebright explained that EcoHealth's 2019 grant proposal, which referenced "in vitro and in vivo infection experiments," "unequivocally" should have prompted review by the P3CO.²⁰ Two other scientists wrote in June 2020 that "the central logic of [EcoHealth's] grant was to test the pandemic potential of SARS-related bat coronaviruses by making ones with pandemic potential, either through genetic engineering or passaging, or both."²¹

In light of this information, we write to request that you answer the following questions about the P3CO and its scope of review for funding decisions involving deadly pathogens:

1. Do you believe that the NIAID should have flagged the EcoHealth grants involving research about bat coronaviruses for review by the P3CO?
2. Do you have any reason to believe that U.S. taxpayer dollars have funded any other research into enhanced PPPs without review by the P3CO since 2017?
3. In your January 2020 comments you acknowledged certain "definition issues" with the P3CO review framework. Do you consider gain of function research only to apply to the enhancement of viruses that infect humans or also the enhancement of viruses that infect animals?

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Samuel Chamberlain, *Fauci admits "modest" NIH funding of Wuhan lab but denies "gain of function,"* N.Y. Post, May 25, 2021. According to one account, the NIH and EcoHealth believe that gain of function research only applies to the enhancement of viruses that infect human, not viruses that infect animals. *See* Wade, *supra* note 3.

¹⁸ Kerr, *supra* note 5.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Jonathan Latham, Ph.D. & Allison Wilson, Ph.D., *The case is building that COVID-19 had a lab origin,* Independent Science News, June 2, 2020.

David Christian Hassell, Ph.D.

June 2, 2021

Page 4

4. In your January 2020 comments, you acknowledged that the P3CO had completed only two funding reviews and was in the middle of its third. As of today, how many reviews has the P3CO completed? How many reviews are still underway?
5. Have you or any other member of the P3CO discussed the EcoHealth grants with Dr. Fauci or any employee of NIAID or NIH since January 2020? Please explain.
6. How often have you communicated with Dr. Fauci in your role as chair of the P3CO since 2017. Please explain.


We also ask that you please meet with us at your earliest convenience to discuss these matters in more detail. Please contact Judiciary Committee staff at (202) 225-6906 to schedule this meeting.

Thank you for your cooperation with our inquiry.

Sincerely,



Jim Jordan
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary



Mike Gallagher
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Jerrold L. Nadler, Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary