

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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June 3, 2021

Dr. Eric Lander
Director
Office of Science and Technology Policy
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Director Lander:

As the Ranking Republican Members of the Research and Technology Subcommittee and the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, with jurisdiction over the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), we write to obtain more information on OSTP's role in investigating the origins of the COVID-19 virus and federally funded Gain-of-Function (GOF) research. On May 26, 2021, President Biden "asked the Intelligence Community to redouble their efforts to collect and analyze information [related to the origins of COVID-19] that could bring us closer to a definitive conclusion, and to report back to [him] in 90 days."¹ During this critical 90 day period, we believe OSTP, a cabinet level office, must play an active role ensuring a comprehensive investigation that includes sound scientific expertise, and the coordination and cooperation of all federal research agencies with the intelligence community.

Over multiple Administrations OSTP has provided policy guidance to federal research agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), on GOF research. In 2014, OSTP announced a United States Government (USG) process to assess the risks and benefits of GOF studies.² The announcement of the assessment included reference to biosafety and biosecurity "incidents." The "pause" and assessment of GOF research clearly indicates the severity and risk of GOF research when unsecured or in the hands of malign actors.

¹ *Statement by President Joe Biden on the Investigation into the Origins of COVID-19*, THE WHITE HOUSE (May 26, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/26/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-investigation-into-the-origins-of-covid-19/>.

² *U.S. Government Gain-of-Function Deliberative Process and Research Funding Pause on Selected Gain-of-Function Research Involving Influenza, MERS, and SARS Viruses*, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS. (Oct. 17, 2014), available at <https://www.phe.gov/s3/dualuse/Documents/gain-of-function.pdf>.

However, the pause of GOF research only applied to “research projects that may be reasonably anticipated to confer attributes to influenza, MERS, or SARS viruses such that the virus would have enhanced pathogenicity and/or transmissibility in mammals via the respiratory route” and did not apply to GOF testing of naturally occurring influenza, MERS, and SARS viruses.³

Subsequently, in January 2017, OSTP issued guidance⁴ on the use of GOF research after a multi-year review by National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) in coordination with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and HHS.⁵ At that time, the moratorium on GOF research was not lifted.

On December 19, 2017, HHS issued the “Framework for Guiding Funding Decisions about Proposed Research Involving Enhanced Potential Pandemic Pathogens.”⁶ As a result, NIH lifted its pause on GOF research dating back to 2014.⁷

The Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) is known globally for GOF research. WIV has received federal research funding, including funding from NIH through the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases to study the risk of bat coronavirus emergence.⁸ The WIV received approximately \$598,500 of the grant to EcoHealth from 2014-2019.⁹ In 2019, the grant was reauthorized for \$3.7 million over five years.¹⁰ Although the NIH funding to WIV was not approved for GOF, Dr. Francis Collins testified before the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations that “We are of course not aware of other sources of funds or other activities they might have undertaken outside of what our approved grant allowed.”¹¹ This statement amongst a litany of mounting evidence raises legitimate concerns regarding the safety and security of federally funded research to the WIV.

³ *Doing Diligence to Assess the Risks and Benefits of Life Sciences Gain-of-Function Research*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Oct. 17, 2014), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/10/17/doing-diligence-assess-risks-and-benefits-life-sciences-gain-function-research>.

⁴ *Recommended Policy Guidance for Departmental Development of Review Mechanisms for Potential Pandemic Pathogen Care and Oversight (P3CO)*, NAT’L INSTS. OF HEALTH (Jan. 9, 2017), available at https://osp.od.nih.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017_OSTP_P3CO_Policy_Guidance.pdf.

⁵ National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, *Recommendations for the Evaluation and Oversight of Proposed Gain-of-Function Research*, NAT’L INSTS. OF HEALTH (May 2016), available at https://osp.od.nih.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/NSABB_Final_Report_Recommendations_Evaluation_Oversight_Proposed_Gain_of_Function_Research.pdf.

⁶ *Framework for Guiding Funding Decisions about Proposed Research Involving Enhanced Potential Pandemic Pathogens*, U.S. DEP’T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS. (Dec. 19, 2017), available at <https://www.phe.gov/s3/dualuse/Documents/P3CO.pdf>.

⁷ *NIH Lifts Funding Pause on Gain-of-Function Research*, NAT’L INSTS. OF HEALTH (Dec. 19, 2017), <https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/who-we-are/nih-director/statements/nih-lifts-funding-pause-gain-function-research>.

⁸ Award Profile Grant Summary, Project Grant FAIN R01A110964, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/ASST_NON_R01A110964_7529.

⁹ Betsy McKay, *NIH Presses U.S. Nonprofit for Information on Wuhan Virology Lab*, WALL ST. J. (Aug. 19, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nih-presses-u-s-nonprofit-for-information-on-wuhan-virology-lab-11597829400>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *FY 2022 Budget Request for the National Institutes of Health: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Appropriations, Subcomm. on Labor, Health & Human Servs., Education, & Related Agencies*, 117th Cong. (May 25, 2021) (testimony of Dr. Francis S. Collins, Dir., Nat’l Insts. of Health), available at <https://appropriations.house.gov/events/hearings/fy-2022-budget-request-for-the-national-institutes-of-health>.

OSTP has historically played a central role in providing policy guidance and directives to agencies pertaining to GOF activities. As a result, and in consideration of President Biden's 90-day origins of COVID-19 review, we request a Member-level briefing by June 30, 2021 to provide information to the Committee on the following questions regarding OSTP's role in the review and assessment of existing USG policies related to GOF:

- President Biden has directly tasked the Intelligence Community with the 90-day review, what is OSTP's role in the review?
- Considering OSTP advises the President on scientific aspects of national security, how is OSTP coordinating with other agencies to review the merit, safety, and security of USG research at WIV?
- Does OSTP plan to review policies and procedures that lead to resumption of GOF research?
- Does OSTP plan to conduct a new risk analysis of GOF research?
- Does OSTP plan to review all GOF science or research grants or subgrants issued between 2014 and today?
- Is OSTP reviewing federal grants or subgrants to Wuhan Institute of Virology and other Chinese laboratories between 2015 and 2019?
- Will OSTP review the process by which NASBB and NAS conducted a risk assessment on GOF research, and the conclusions reached that lead to a resumption?

Sincerely,



Michael Waltz
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Research and Technology



Frank Lucas
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Cc: Rep. Haley Stevens, Chair, Subcommittee on Research and Technology
Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, Chair, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology