

NBAF politics

No site for a bio-defense lab is without risk, but the nation can have confidence in the choice of a Kansas location.

J-W Editorials

July 29, 2009

The need for ironclad security and safeguards at the new National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility goes without saying. By definition, the lab that will replace a facility in Plum Island, N.Y., will handle pathogens with potential catastrophic power.

However, the greatest threat to the new facility, slated to be built in Manhattan, now appears to be largely political. After a six-year selection process that considered a number of sites on the U.S. mainland, a draft report by the Government Accountability Office is raising questions about how the selection was made and saying the choice of Kansas for the new lab is seriously flawed.

The GAO claims the Department of Homeland Security's determination that dangerous animal diseases could be safely handled in Kansas or any other location on the U.S. mainland was not "scientifically defensible." The fact that the GAO is only now raising these concerns could make observers wonder what kind of political pressure might have been applied.

Not surprisingly, officials in Texas, who believe they were the runner-up to Kansas for the NBAF plant, are quick to agree that the Homeland Security process was flawed. Their main goal, however, is not to move the facility off the mainland, but to move it to their proposed site in San Antonio.

The Texas group, and apparently some at the GAO, are very focused on what they see as a grave threat of tornados in Kansas and the impact that might have on a lab. This is just nonsense. As the Kansas congressional delegation pointed out in a press release Monday, the county in which San Antonio is located has twice as many tornado touchdowns than Riley County. Granted, Texas is a bigger state than Kansas, but it also is the No. 1 state for tornados, the release said, and No. 2 for hurricanes.

Natural disasters can occur anywhere. Even tiny Plum Island, N.Y., located off the tip of Long Island, could be hit by a severe and unpredictable storm. And although the island is separated by several miles of water from Long Island, it's hardly remote from heavily populated areas, with New York City only about 100 miles away. Dangers will exist no matter where NBAF is located. It simply means that appropriate safeguards must be in place.

Probably the greatest threat, however, comes not from natural disasters but from human sabotage or attack. That is a threat that certainly can be handled as well in Manhattan as anywhere. Researchers at Kansas State University are well trained and well aware of the dangers posed by the pathogens this lab will handle. The nation can be confident that this research will be in good hands.

At the very least, the current controversy is likely to slow progress on funding for the NBAF lab, which is unfortunate considering the urgent need to move forward on this project. The Texas consortium that tried to attract NBAF repeated its claim on Monday that the selection of the Kansas site was tainted by "politics at its very worst." Unfortunately, the political battles over this project don't appear to be over.

Originally published at: <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2009/jul/29/nbaf-politics/>