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Fight to bring new biolab to KSU

With all due respect to the pros at the Government Accountability Office, the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility belongs in Kansas. This isn't a case of a hunger for federal pork blinding Kansans to the risks. Kansans just know that if the pros at Kansas State University can't be trusted to handle the responsibility associated with such a lab, no one can.

A new GAO draft report finds fault with the Department of Homeland Security's January decision to build the \$500 million lab in Manhattan. The report argues that it was not "scientifically defensible" for DHS to conclude that dangerous animal pathogens such as foot-and-mouth disease could be handled safely in Kansas. A House subcommittee plans a hearing Thursday on the report; the Kansas delegation is fighting to secure \$36 million in funding and begin construction next year.

One contention in the report is the same one Texas tried in legally challenging the DHS decision — the threat of tornadoes. An attorney for the Texas consortium that sought the lab for San Antonio jumped on the GAO report, calling the siting process "politics at its very worst" and declaring, "they call it 'Tornado Alley' for a reason."

But Kansas Sens. Sam Brownback and Pat Roberts and Reps. Lynn Jenkins, Jerry Moran and Todd Tiahrt pointed out in a statement Monday that the Texas county proposed for NBAF historically has had more tornadoes than Kansas' Riley County. Plus, Texas as a whole leads the nation in tornadoes — and comes in second to Florida for hurricanes.

Maybe there could be more debate over whether such research is best conducted off the mainland, such as at the current facility in Plum Island, N.Y. But the site selection took six years; surely that risk assessment should have been done and redone by now.

And as the Kansas lawmakers pointed out: "Level 4 biosecurity research on human pathogens is already conducted in several other locations in the continental United States."

If the Centers for Disease Control can operate safely in Atlanta, a center for animal disease research ought to be able to operate safely in Kansas, which already is home to the Biosecurity Research Institute.

As for whether politics drove the decision: President Bush, formerly governor of Texas, was still in office when Kansas won the lab. If Congress succeeds in setting aside the decision now, that will look like politics.

It was a "transparent six-year process, run by career civil servants and punctuated with multiple public meetings near each finalist location," said Department of Homeland Security spokesman Matthew Chandler.

The lab does hold real promise for further economic development of what's become a national corridor of research and commerce related to animal health and bioscience. But as DHS said last year, the "Manhattan campus site was among the least expensive to construct and had among the lowest planned operation costs of all the site alternatives." Such conclusions should matter more than ever to taxpayers.

While Congress is slowing down the NBAF project, the Plum Island lab isn't getting any younger or more up-to-date. The sooner the state-of-the-art NBAF is built at KSU, the sooner the nation can know the future of its agriculture economy is secure.

— For the editorial board, Rhonda Holman