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Get moving on Kansas bio lab

Kansas was chosen to be the site of a future federal, \$650 million biodefense lab for good reasons.

The nation's premier food- and-livestock-safety researchers are clustered at Kansas State University in Manhattan.

The Kansas Bioscience Authority has fostered a nurturing climate for scientific endeavors.

And the state's political leaders mounted a unified effort to win the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility, a project of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

However, a different federal agency has raised questions about Homeland Security's assessment of the proposed site in Manhattan, and whether it could safely handle the dangerous pathogens that must be studied before they can be countered.

The Government Accountability Office said in a draft report that the methods of determining safety were "inadequate." Homeland Security disputes that claim.

Regardless of which government agency is on point, questions about safety must be fully answered at a scheduled congressional hearing Thursday in Washington. A release of pathogens into the Midwest livestock supply would be catastrophic.

But the focus of efforts in the nation's capital at this point must be to determine what measures should be taken to make the Kansas plant completely secure. It is much too late to reopen the selection process.

The GAO's doubts provided fresh oxygen to critics who contend that Homeland Security officials should have chosen a site in San Antonio, Texas, for the lab.

In a lawsuit and repeated statements, Texas boosters have noted that the Manhattan site may be at risk for tornadoes. "They call it 'Tornado Alley' for a reason," a Lone Star state lawyer sneered to The Washington Post.

But as U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, a Kansas Republican, noted Tuesday, nuclear power plants are thought to be safe in tornado-prone regions. The Kansas lab can be built to withstand natural and manmade threats.

According to Homeland Security documents, Kansas was selected over Texas because of K-State's specialties in food safety, veterinary medicine and agriculture, and because site acquisition and construction costs were deemed to be lower in Kansas.

Texas officials who have been whining that Kansas leaders had better access to Homeland Security bureaucrats appear unwilling to admit they were simply out-hustled.

The selection process was fair, and Kansas won on merit. It's time to determine what needs to be done to make the biodefense lab secure and get construction under way in Manhattan.