



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

June 26, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

We write with strong concerns surrounding the Administration's termination of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant to EcoHealth Alliance on April 24, 2020.¹ In the letter communicating the grant's termination, NIH Deputy Director for Extramural Research, Dr. Michael Lauer, wrote that "At this time, NIH does not believe the current project outcomes align with the program goals and agency priorities."² However, press reports indicate that the grant was canceled because a small portion of the funding was to be given to the Wuhan Institute of Virology for on-the-ground sample collection and analysis.³ Given the potential for this study to inform our knowledge of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) transmission, it is deeply concerning that it may have been canceled for political reasons in the midst of the current pandemic.

It is always important that federal research priorities are driven by science-based decisions. This is especially true in a time that requires unparalleled investment in research that may help bring an end to this public health crisis. It is therefore troubling that this abrupt grant cancellation came just a week after President Trump announced that the Administration was looking into "grants going to that area" and continued that "we will end that grant very quickly."⁴ This was in response to a reporter referencing false claims that COVID-19 "likely

¹ Sarah Owerhohle, "Trump cuts U.S. research on bat-human virus transmission over China ties," *Politico*, April 27, 2020, accessed here: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/27/trump-cuts-research-bat-human-virus-china-213076>

² Nurith Aizenman, "Why The U.S. Government Stopped Funding A Research Project On Bats And Coronaviruses," *NPR*, May 1, 2020, accessed here: <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/04/29/847948272/why-the-u-s-government-stopped-funding-a-research-project-on-bats-and-coronavirus>

³ *Id.*

⁴ Clip of President Trump with Coronavirus Task Force Briefing, *CSPAN*, April 17, 2020, accessed here: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4869590/user-clip-us-2015-grant-wuhan-lab-question>

came from a Level 4 lab in Wuhan.”⁵ The Administration has been pushing this theory⁶ despite scientific experts saying this path of transmission would be virtually impossible given what is known about the virus and lab safety protocols.⁷ If this theory is the basis for the grant termination, it would be an egregious example of the Administration politicizing scientific decision making in order to further a politically convenient narrative.

EcoHealth Alliance’s grant was renewed in 2019 after an initial five-year grant on the same topic. The grant it received was extremely competitive – only 22 percent of proposals were funded in 2019.⁸ The July 2019 project proposal was titled, “Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence.”⁹ In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that has taken over 115,000 American lives, it is inconceivable that this project would no longer “align with the program goals and agency priorities” of NIH. Any termination of a grant that has gone through NIH’s rigorous scientific review process must be adequately justified on a scientific basis – particularly a grant which would appear to be so relevant to understanding our current health crisis.

As the Committees of jurisdiction over public health and science, we need to better understand the decision to terminate EcoHealth Alliance’s NIH grant. We are especially concerned given Dr. Anthony Fauci’s, Director of NIH’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, assertion at a Committee on Energy and Commerce hearing on June 23 that “the grant was canceled because NIH was told to cancel it.”¹⁰ In order to understand how this decision was reached, we request a briefing to be delivered by July 15, 2020. At this briefing, we ask that you be prepared to address the following questions:

1. When the decision was made to terminate the grant to EcoHealth Alliance;
2. Who at HHS was involved in the decision to terminate the grant;
3. Whether entities outside HHS, including but not limited to the White House, the State Department, the National Security Council, and intelligence agencies, were involved in this decision;

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Mark Mazzetti, Julian E. Barnes, Edward Wong, and Adam Goldman, “Trump Officials Are Said to Press Spies to Link Virus and Wuhan Labs,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2020, accessed here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/us/politics/trump-administration-intelligence-coronavirus-china.html>

⁷ Geoff Brumfel and Emily Kwong, “Virus Researchers Cast Doubt On Theory Of Coronavirus Lab Accident,” *NPR*, April 23, 2020, accessed here: <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/04/23/841729646/virus-researchers-cast-doubt-on-theory-of-coronavirus-lab-accident>

⁸ Research Grants: Competing Applications, Awards, and Success Rates, National Institutes of Health, January 2020, accessed here: <https://report.nih.gov/nihdatabook/category/6>

⁹ “Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence,” National Institutes of Health Research Portfolio Online Reporting Tools, July 2019, accessed here:

https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project_info_description.cfm?aid=9819304&icde=49752569

¹⁰ House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Testimony of Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., Director, National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, *Oversight of the Trump Administration’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 116th Cong. (Jun. 23, 2020).

4. The analysis conducted to determine that the EcoHealth Alliance grant's project outcomes did not align with program goals and NIH priorities;
5. Any analysis conducted to determine EcoHealth Alliance's alleged improper disbursement of NIH funds to the Wuhan Institute of Virology;
6. Any other decision NIH has made to terminate grants since January 1, 2020; and
7. Any further action NIH is considering taking regarding EcoHealth Alliance or any other grant holder regarding alleged relationships with international laboratories.

In addition to the briefing, we request the following materials be provided to the Committees no later than July 10, 2020. Please provide these materials in a searchable electronic format.

1. All documents and communications relating to the cancellation of EcoHealth Alliance's grant, including the notification to and any response from EcoHealth Alliance;
2. All documents and communications regarding any potential direction from outside entities, including the White House or other Agencies or Departments, to terminate grants based on suspicion of collaboration with international laboratories;
3. All documentation of audits or other analyses conducted to determine improper disbursement of federal grant money from grant-holding institutions to other entities; and
4. The criteria that NIH used to assess the EcoHealth Alliance grant and determine that such grant merited cancellation, and documentation thereof.

Any decision to terminate a research grant should be conducted in a deliberative and transparent process that adheres to the highest standards of scientific integrity. Especially in this unprecedented time, it is important that our public health and science agencies remain free from political pressure and be allowed to pursue federally-funded research based on scientific merit.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to speaking with you and reviewing the relevant materials.

Sincerely,



Eddie Bernice Johnson
Chairwoman
Committee on Science, Space,
and Technology



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce

Bill Foster

Bill Foster
Chairman
Subcommittee on Investigations and
Oversight

Diana DeGette

Diana DeGette
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