

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 24, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

The House Science, Space, and Technology Committee held a hearing on May 25, 2016, to examine the science behind the Zika virus and the transmission of the disease.

The primary warning articulated by scientific experts at the hearing was that individuals should avoid all non-essential travel to countries with endemic Zika. As one of the hearing's expert witnesses testified, all Zika cases in the continental United States so far have been attributed to travel-associated exposure with no local transmission confirmed. However, over 1800 locally acquired infections have been reported in American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In other words, the Zika cases in the mainland United States are from infections picked up outside the country.

If Americans continue to believe it is safe to travel to countries where the Zika virus is rampant, more will return home with infections. This increases the risks for all of us, whether we travel abroad or not, because if a mosquito bites a person who has carried Zika into the U.S., that mosquito can infect every other person it bites.

This point was underscored when, immediately after the hearing, 150 prominent individuals with scientific, academic and other public health backgrounds sent a letter to the Director of the World Health Organization (WHO). The underlying concern identified in the letter was an apprehension by the signatories about global health implications from travel to countries like Brazil. As their letter notes, the "Brazilian strain of Zika virus harms health in ways that science has not observed before." We believe the global health risks of travel to countries with Zika are valid for several other nations with the highest number of confirmed and suspected Zika cases including Colombia, Venezuela, Martinique and Honduras.

This new manifestation of the Zika virus includes many unknowns, as experts are still unsure about something as fundamental as whether newly hatched mosquitos are born with Zika, or if the insects carry the virus only after biting an infected person. The potential impact of the Zika virus on Americans' health and welfare could be profound.

The American Red Cross, for example, based on guidance from the Food and Drug Administration, has implemented restrictions on blood donors who have been to countries on the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Zika Travel Information list. And couples seeking fertility treatment have to wait two to six months after returning from a country on the CDC Zika list.

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Despite these concerns, and the fact that there still remains much about the Zika virus that deserves study, the CDC has issued only Level Two travel alerts, which advise travelers only to “practice enhanced precautions.” It has not issued any Level Three warnings to “avoid nonessential travel,” as it did with the Ebola virus in West Africa.

The WHO in February declared Zika a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). This declaration is reserved for a situation that is “serious, unusual or unexpected; carries implications for public health beyond the affected State’s national border; and may require immediate international action.”


U.S. residents, men and women, pregnant or otherwise, need their government to provide accurate information about the potential risks of travelling to countries where the Zika virus is spreading.

Given the risks associated with the Zika virus, we request that you immediately raise the travel warnings to Level 3 for Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Martinique and Honduras, and other countries as appropriate.

Sincerely,



Rep. Lamar Smith
Chairman
Committee on Science, Space,
and Technology



Rep. Kevin Brady
Chairman
Committee on Ways and Means



Rep. Frank D. Lucas
Member of Congress



Rep. Dana Rohrabacher
Member of Congress



Rep. Jeff Miller
Member of Congress



Rep. Michael C. Burgess, MD
Member of Congress

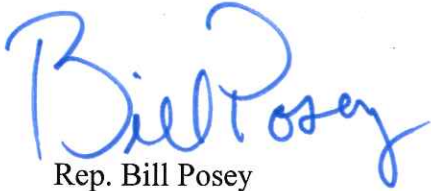
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Member of Congress



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Rep. Scott Tipton
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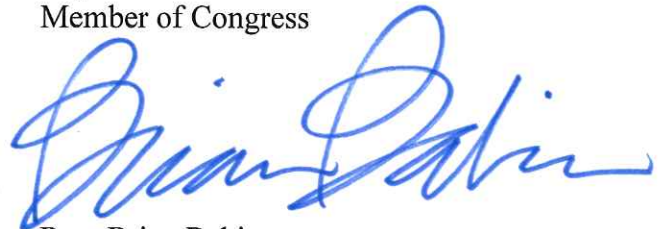
Rep. Randy Weber
Member of Congress



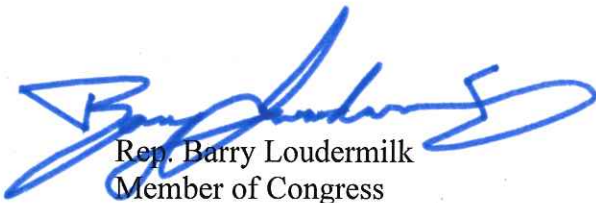
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