

# **Bioweapons Watchdogs Seek Suspension of University of Texas Eligibility for Federal Biodefense Research Funds**

## **Medical Branch Fails to Comply with Biosafety Guidelines Coalition Promotes Biological Weapons Safety and Security**

### **A JOINT NEWS RELEASE FROM:**

**Citizens Education Project**  
Salt Lake City, UT

**Coalition for a Safe Lab**  
Hamilton, MT

**Council for Responsible Genetics**  
Cambridge, MA

**Los Alamos Study Group**  
Albuquerque, NM

**Nuclear Watch of New Mexico**  
Santa Fe, NM

**Physicians for Social Responsibility**  
Washington, DC

**The Sunshine Project**  
Austin, TX

**Tri-Valley CAREs**  
Livermore, CA

**Western States Legal Foundation**  
Oakland, CA

(6 August 2003) - Biological weapons watchdogs have asked the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) to suspend biodefense funding for the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston (UTMB). At issue is the Medical Branch's secrecy about its research on biological weapons agents and its refusal to comply with federal biosafety guidelines. The short-term cost to UTMB could be as high as \$250 million and bruised ambitions. But the long-term benefits for all of establishing higher standards of public accountability at institutions conducting biodefense research, says the watchdog coalition, will be enhanced peace, security, and safety in the US and around the world.

The latest moves in an eleven month old dispute with UTMB came Monday, when a member of the coalition, the Sunshine Project, petitioned Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID) to suspend NIAID's consideration of UTMB's applications for a federally-funded BSL-4 "hot zone" lab and a regional biodefense research consortium. Also Monday, the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas filed a legal brief with the Texas Attorney General supporting the coalition's demand that UTMB stop resisting public disclosure of its biosafety committee records.

The watchdogs do not oppose biodefense research, nor do they accuse UTMB of developing biological weapons, rather, they insist that secrecy is the greatest enemy of biological weapons security. They seek maximum research transparency at all biodefense labs because openness will better protect the communities that surround "hot zones" and will reinforce the United States' compliance with the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, the critical international treaty that prohibits development of biological weapons. This debate over transparency comes at a critical time because the US biodefense program is rapidly expanding, coming to touch communities across the country as the "War on Terrorism" erodes standards of governmental accountability and new studies continue to reveal new, disturbing potential applications of biotechnology to bioweapons.

(These and other reasons behind the non-profit coalition's efforts are discussed in more detail in the press release "*Non-Profit Coalition Calls for a National Reassessment of the Biodefense Building Boom*", October 14<sup>th</sup>, and in its Open Letters to biodefense laboratories, links provided below.)

The coalition is active across the country. UTMB has been singled out for this action because its transparency and biosafety policies are particularly egregious. Since September 2002, it has refused to substantively answer at least nine requests for information about its biosafety policies. In the course of seeking a 100% exemption from public disclosure of information about its biosafety committee, UTMB has even misled the Texas Attorney General with respect to federal laboratory safety regulations. The coalition hopes that by holding up UTMB's failures as an example, other biodefense laboratories will come to better understand their public responsibilities.

The coalition is following other biodefense projects across the country, including the US Army's Dugway Proving Ground (Dugway, UT), and proposed Biosafety Level 4 labs in Boston, MA, Davis, CA, and Hamilton, MT. It is also engaged with the Department of Energy over its plans to build Biosafety Level 3 labs at Lawrence Livermore National Lab (Livermore, CA) and Los Alamos National Lab (Los Alamos, NM).

Detailed information about the action against UTMB (including legal briefs), can be found at:  
<http://www.sunshine-project.org/biodefense/utmb.html>

About the Coalition:

*Non-Profit Coalition Calls for a National Reassessment of the Biodefense Building Boom*  
<http://www.sunshine-project.org/publications/pr/pr141002.html>

Open Letters to biodefense laboratories:  
<http://www.sunshine-project.org/biodefense/openletters.html>