

Official supports Bio-Agro Defense lab

BY BRIANNE DOPART : The Herald-Sun
bdopart@heraldsun.com

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DURHAM -- Warwick Arden doesn't want "gross misconceptions" about the proposed National Bio Agro-Defense Facility to be what stands between North Carolina and the state's opportunity to be on the cutting edge of animal disease research.

Arden is dean of the N.C. State University College of Veterinary Medicine and lead spokesman for the North Carolina Consortium for the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility, a group of scientists, academics, officials and corporations who believe that construction of such a lab, wherever it ends up, is in the best interest of the United States.

The current U.S. facility for such research, which is more than 50 years old, is on the remote Plum Island, N.Y., accessible only by ferry. As a result, Arden said, the U.S. is extremely unprepared to handle any serious outbreak of animal disease.

At Tuesday night's meeting of Durham's InterNeighborhood Council, Arden spoke in favor of the lab he says will bring economic and academic benefits to the region and urged residents to wait for the release in early May of an environmental impact study on the facility's proposed placement outside Butner.

Concerns voiced about the proposed facility, most recently at a town hall-style meeting with the Department of Homeland Security last week in Creedmoor, have helped propel misinformation about the lab, Arden said.

The most glaring misconception, he said, confuses the lab, which will house research regarding infectious and foreign diseases affecting animals and that are not communicable from human to human, with one that will produce biological weapons, which Arden pointed out are illegal under international law.

Because the lab will only research diseases passed from animal to animal and in some cases, animal to human, outbreaks of human diseases mentioned by opponents of the lab are not possible, Arden said. Of the eight diseases that will be studied at the lab -- Arden said environmental impact studies will need to be performed before any additional diseases will be studied at the lab -- four impact only animals, four can be passed to humans and of those four, only two involve any serious health threat.

"That's the first I'd heard of that," said County Commissioner Becky Heron, who attended the meeting and asked Arden if officials have any evacuation plan in place for Butner's hospitals and prison should such an outbreak occur. While Arden answered that because of the nature of diseases to be studied at the facility such an outbreak is impossible, he noted that such an evacuation plan should already be in place because of the much more likely possibility of a natural disaster.

Arden said that he felt that the suspicious stance taken by opponents -- some of whom held up "Lies in Progress" signs as officials addressed questions at the Creedmoor meeting -- resulted from the lab's affiliation with the Department of Homeland Security, which is exempt from Freedom of Information requests.

The running of the proposed lab, he said, would be as transparent as possible. The proposed sites for the lab are close to universities and research facilities because officials want the lab to benefit from collaborative work not possible in its current remote location off northeastern Long Island.

To allow for this collaboration, the work in the lab must not be classified and must be subject to Freedom of Information Act requests, Arden said.

Homeland Security officials, he added, have stated as much on the record several times.

Meeting attendee Lynn Kohn said that Arden's promises of transparency did little to reassure her. Even the creation of a Citizen Oversight Committee -- the likes of which Arden said would oversee the goings on of the lab -- wouldn't prevent the lab from taking on work of a more classified nature in the future, she said.

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