

**April 14, 2006**

**Press Release** | Contact: Danielle Langone (202) 225-6416

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WASHINGTON, DC—Concerned about the threat of an influenza pandemic, U.S. Congressman Peter DeFazio and other Democrats on the House Committee on Homeland Security sent a letter to President Bush today urging him to develop a comprehensive, operational plan in case of a pandemic.

In February, Congressman DeFazio participated in an exercise at the National Defense University that simulated the outbreak of pandemic influenza in the United States. The exercise highlighted the devastation and chaos such a pandemic could cause if the United States is not properly prepared.

“Experts agree that an influenza pandemic is inevitable. The question is, how bad it will be and what form it will take—H5N1, SARS or another strain altogether,” DeFazio said. “Just like protecting against the nuclear threat from the Soviet Union, we need to be prepared for this crisis. We need state-of-the-art vaccine and antiviral production capacity to produce and stockpile antiviral medication, and we can't wait on the pharmaceutical industry to do it when it is in their interest. We can take concrete steps to be prepared, and to date, very little is being done.”

The text of today's letter is included below:



**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

The Honorable George W. Bush  
President  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Bush:

The Democratic Members of the Committee on Homeland Security of the House of Representatives are deeply concerned about the lack of strategic leadership in addressing the numerous biological threats to our nation. As avian influenza spreads across Europe and around the world, we are particularly concerned about the developing threat of an influenza pandemic.

We had hoped that our concerns would be somewhat mitigated by the briefing Homeland Security Committee members received on April 6 from Dr. Venkayya, your Special Assistant for Biodefense, regarding the implementation plan for the National Strategy on Pandemic Influenza. We expected this briefing to present some clear and detailed operational plans for federal, state, and local officials to follow in the event of a pandemic. Instead, the presentation contained the same vague language that the National Strategy outlined last December.

A strategy with no operational details will not protect the American public. This implementation plan was originally to be completed in February. At the briefing Dr. Venkayya said that the implementation plan would be publicly released by the end of April. If what was presented at the April 6th briefing is the final draft, however, there is little point to issuing it, as it contains barely more detail than did the National Strategy. We are deeply concerned by the lack of urgency on the part of your administration in the face of an impending catastrophe of such magnitude.

The National Strategy outlined the need for \$7.1 billion to prepare for an avian flu epidemic. Of this amount, 85% is focused solely on vaccine and antiviral countermeasures that we do not currently have the capacity to produce. This same proposal requests only \$251 million to “detect and contain outbreaks” of a potential deadly flu. It contains only \$644 million “to ensure that all levels of government are prepared to respond to a pandemic outbreak.”

Even if cell-based vaccine production technology were available today, the time required to progress from virus isolation to vaccine production would be approximately 6 months. Based on this plan, no vaccine would be available for months, and hundreds of thousands of Americans could potentially contract the virus and die. We cannot rely on vaccines as the centerpiece of our pandemic strategy. It will take time to develop new vaccines and prepare them for distribution.

A more balanced approach is needed. As the virus spreads across the world, it is imperative that every town in America prepare now for an outbreak and know precisely what steps to take. State and local preparedness must be fully supported. Yet, you asked Congress for only \$100 million for States to “complete and exercise their pandemic plans before a pandemic strike.” This is far too little funding for this vital task, and it was left to Congress to increase

this amount to \$350 million in the Department of Defense, Emergency Supplemental Appropriations to Address Hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, and Pandemic Influenza Act of 2006, H.R. 2863.

In the first few months of a flu outbreak, and possibly beyond, non-medical countermeasures - limited social contact, more frequent hand washing, use of masks, automatic doors, and as a last resort, quarantines - will be our only defense against the proliferation of the disease. Plans for the use of these methods must be in place and ready to be initiated at a moment's notice. Public education is key for these efforts to be successful, but to date we have not seen any plans for a public education campaign from your Administration.

True preparedness will also include funding our nation's hospitals to handle the expected surge in demand that they will face. Many of our hospitals are already operating at or near 100% of their capacity. They will not be able to absorb the large influx of patients that will occur during a major influenza outbreak unless they begin planning now for additional capacity.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have begun holding state level meetings to discuss localized strategies and plans for response. As of the date of this letter, 40 of these State meetings have taken place, and the two Departments involved expect that all 50 States will ultimately participate. These meetings are definitely a step in the right direction, but they must be further developed and include follow-up status meetings to be comprehensive. Further, many of these meetings have excluded critical partners such as the National Guard and private sector interests. These important partners must be included. Finally, while State and local officials can best judge their own capacity for preparedness and response, a pandemic will demand a nationally-coordinated strategy. The Federal Government must provide a detailed, operational plan that can immediately be adopted by Federal, State, and local decision-makers in the event of a pandemic outbreak.

We also have a number of concerns about the ability of the Department of Homeland Security to fulfill their role in preparing for an influenza epidemic. The Department, through the FY06 emergency supplemental appropriation process, received \$47.3 million to prepare for this national crisis. Your FY 2007 budget does not request any additional funding for pandemic influenza preparedness, and yet we know a crisis is coming. Why has your administration not requested resources in your budget to address this urgent issue, and instead opted to rely on emergency supplemental appropriations?

Another problem in the Department that concerns us deeply is the lack of resources granted to the Department of Homeland Security's newly created Office of the Chief Medical Officer, who has also been designated to head the pandemic influenza preparedness process for the Department. Dr. Runge is highly respected, but his office does not have even the minimal resources necessary to do the job. The Chief Medical Officer's budget has been increased only slightly, to \$5 million for all operations, from the FY 2006 level of \$3 million. The office received only five additional full time employees, for a total of 15 personnel. A true pandemic influenza outbreak will strain every sector of our society, and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer will not be able to help prepare effectively unless sufficient staff and significant resources are in

place to manage a task of this magnitude.

Mr. President, many of the threats we confront in Homeland Security occur without advance warning. When we do have notice, it is our duty to use that time wisely to protect, prepare, and defend our nation. Recently, the Administration failed to translate advance notice of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita into a preparedness and response plan that could have saved thousands of lives from the wrath of these storms. In the case of avian flu, we have already had one year to prepare, but we do not yet have a comprehensive, operational plan to protect our nation. Secretary Chertoff has said that he believes the H5N1 avian influenza virus will be on American soil within months. And a mutation in the virus that will allow human-to-human transmission could happen at any time.

In the time remaining, we must ensure that a coherent, nationwide response to an influenza pandemic is ready. The situation is critical and further delays will put the American public at continued risk. We urge you to make it a top priority to develop a true, detailed operational plan and ensure its implementation.

Sincerely,

/s/

Rep. Peter DeFazio  
Rep. Bennie G. Thompson  
Rep. Bill Pascrell  
Rep. James Langevin  
Rep. Loretta Sanchez  
Rep. Zoe Lofgren  
Rep. Kendrick B. Meek  
Rep. Edward Markey  
Rep. Jane Harman  
Rep. Nita Lowey  
Rep. Norm Dicks  
Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee  
Rep. Donna Christensen  
Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton