

The Honorable Francis S. Collins
Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

May 20, 2020

Director Francis Collins:

We, the undersigned scientific organizations representing tens of thousands of members of the American biomedical research enterprise, are alarmed by the National Institutes of Health's revocation of a peer-reviewed research grant for studies of coronaviruses by EcoHealth Alliance. Not only is this decision counterintuitive, given the urgent need to better understand the virus that causes COVID-19 and identify drugs that will save lives, but it politicizes science at a time when, if we are to stamp out this scourge, we need the public to trust experts and to take collective action.

The foundation of the American biomedical research enterprise rests on two principles: international collaboration and a robust peer-review process. Both must be vigilantly upheld. The abrupt revocation of the NIH grant for the EcoHealth Alliance concerns us for two primary reasons:

First, the decision seems to be a reaction to a theory about the origins of the COVID-19 virus that the intelligence community itself has publicly repudiated. EcoHealth Alliance at one point collaborated with a lab in Wuhan, China, which has recently been at the center of rumors about the origin of the pandemic. The overall goal of EcoHealth Alliance's research project is to study coronavirus transmission from species to species. But the purpose of the research project has been conflated with these rumors. This is worrisome. International collaboration has propelled the American research enterprise to achieve vital innovations and discoveries; it is the gold standard for the scientific community. The United States is a beacon for the best and brightest minds, consistently attracting top scientists from around the world. However, with this incident, international collaboration is being portrayed as a threat. The scientific enterprise requires diversity, and American scientists depend on their international colleagues to pool resources, expertise, and ultimately make scientific breakthroughs.

Second, the decision sets a dangerous precedent by revoking a grant that was awarded based upon scientific merit without a justifiable rationale such as issues related to scientific or financial fraud or misconduct. This grant is highly and uniquely relevant to all NIAID priorities to address the current COVID-19 pandemic. Most extramural research funds are awarded through a robust peer-review process. Scientists, not politicians, determine the merit of grant applications, and grant recipients are expected to be careful stewards of taxpayer dollars. Throughout the lifetime of a grant, each recipient communicates regularly with scientific review officers at the funding agency and produces progress reports providing evidence that the work remains valuable and on track. This has been the norm and until April 24, 2020 was applied to the now terminated grant. That has now been breached and this action must not become the norm going forward.

The scientific community urges federal funding agencies and policymakers to ensure the transparency, openness, and collaborative nature of the American biomedical research enterprise. We call on the NIH to be

transparent about their decision-making process on this matter. We urge federal funding agencies to safeguard the American biomedical research enterprise. The action taken by the NIH must be immediately reconsidered.

Respectfully,

The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology

The Academy for Radiology and Biomedical Imaging Research

The American Association for Anatomy

The American Institute of Biological Sciences

The American Physiological Society

The American Psychological Association

The American Society for Investigative Pathology

The American Society for Virology

The American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists

The Association of Anatomy, Cell Biology and Neurobiology Chairs

The Association of Biomolecular Resource Facilities

The Association of Medical and Graduate Departments of Biochemistry

The Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health

The Biophysical Society

The Botanical Society of America

The Conference Board of Mathematical Sciences

The Endocrine Society

The Entomological Society of America

The Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology

The Genetics Society of America

The HIV Medicine Association

The Infectious Diseases Society of America

The Natural Science Collections Alliance

The North American Vascular Biology Organization

The Shock Society

The Society for Freshwater Science

The Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles

The Society for the Study of Reproduction

The Society of Toxicology



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The Helminthological Society of Washington

OSA - The Optical Society

CC: Office of Science and Technology Policy Director Kelvin Droegemeier