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House of Representatives

Americans Deserve the Truth:

Did DOD Weaponize Ticks with Lyme Disease?

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, in the spirit of transparency and accountability my amendment directs the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to probe whether the Department of Defense ever weaponized ticks with Lyme disease or any other dangerous pathogen.

Two similar amendments I have offered— one for an investigation by the Inspector General and another by the GAO— previously passed the House but did not make it through the Senate. I offer it again as the investigation and research may help uncover decades-old information and possibly provide some answers for those that suffer from Lyme. Americans deserve the truth.

For years, books and articles have been written credibly asserting that significant research at Fort Detrick, Plum Island, and elsewhere was conducted to turn ticks into bioweapons.

In her book, “Bitten: The Secret History of Lyme Disease and Biological Weapons,” Kris Newby includes interviews with Dr. Willy Burgdorfer, the researcher who is credited with discovering Lyme disease. It turns out that Dr. Burgdorfer was a bioweapons specialist. The interviews, combined with access to Dr. Burgdorfer’s files, reveal that he and other bioweapons specialists stuffed ticks with pathogens in a quest to cause severe disability, disease, and death.

Mr. Speaker, Lyme disease and other tickborne diseases are exploding in the United States. According to the December 2020 report of the Health & Human Services’ TickBorne Disease Working Group—a federal advisory committee created by language included in the 21st Century Cures Act, which I fought for— Lyme disease is the most common tick-borne

disease with an estimated 300,000 new cases diagnosed each year a federal advisory committee created by language included in the 21st Century Cures Act, which I fought for— Lyme disease is the most common tick-borne disease with an estimated 300,000 new cases diagnosed each year. A figure that many researchers, and Lyme-literate doctors, believe is underreported and could be upwards of 476,000 cases each year.

I also might add that this threat is very real for our servicemembers as they train in the field, especially at Fort Dix in my district where the geographic area has an increased prevalence of Lyme. To stop the spread of these horrific tickborne diseases, we must first understand their origins and how they came to be so pervasive.

Mr. Speaker, my amendment tasks the GAO to ask the hard questions about DOD’s bioweapons research on ticks from 1950 to 1977. What were the parameters of the program if there was one? Who ordered it? Was there any accidental release anywhere or at any time of any of the diseased ticks? And the most important question, can any of this information that might be derived from that study, that audit, help current day researchers find a way to mitigate these diseases?

10 to 20 percent of Americans with Lyme suffer with chronic Lyme disease. They have a right to know whether any of this is true, and if any old research documents could be applied by current-day scientists to finding a better diagnostic or treatment for Lyme disease— something that’s desperately needed.

If the investigation concludes our government’s bioweapons program did not contribute to the proliferation of Lyme, we turn the page. And if it did, hopefully this investigation and research will contribute to a cure.