

Dr. Peter Daszak Opening remarks to be submitted to the SSCP ahead of the May 1st hearing.

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz, distinguished members of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic – it is a privilege to come before you today to discuss the vital research that the EcoHealth Alliance conducts globally and to answer your questions about our work. I respect and appreciate the critical mission of your select subcommittee, which is why I have volunteered to testify before you today and similarly volunteered to participate in a full-day transcribed interview with your committee staff earlier this year.

I am Peter Daszak, the President of EcoHealth Alliance, a 501c3 non-profit based in New York, founded in 1971, with a mission to conduct research on emerging disease threats to the US, identify the underlying causes of pandemics, and develop solutions to prevent them, and benefit conservation. In 2005, EcoHealth's scientists developed the first ever emerging infectious disease 'hotspot' map, to chart threats so that we can better target resources to prevent them. Our work and that of many other scientists show that most pandemics originate from animals (mainly wildlife) in rapidly developing countries where people and animals come into direct contact. But, as we saw with COVID-19, once a virus begins to spread, it exploits travel and trade networks, which means a virus emerging anywhere on the planet is a direct threat to all of us here in the USA. Thus our research has direct benefits for the health of the American people, strengthens national security, and enhances sustainable economic growth in our allies around the world.

EcoHealth Alliance scientists have worked in partnership with US Federal Agencies since the early 2000s, with significant funding support from dozens of leading government and philanthropic donors. With NIH funding, we mapped the global spread of high path avian flu and showed its potential to enter the US via trading partners in Canada – information that the Government Accountability Office used to better target strategic surveillance. With support from the Department of Homeland Security we mapped the likely introduction of emerging viruses via air travel and trade, and the threat they represent to US public health and agriculture. With funding from the National Institutes of Health, we identified the origins of the highly lethal Nipah virus, and discovered that bats are the wildlife reservoirs of MERS, SARS, and of a new viral disease that threatens global swine production. In all of our federally-funded projects, we have maintained open, transparent communication with agency staff, rapidly provided information critical to public health and agriculture, uploaded data and genetic sequences into the NIH Genbank database, and published our analyses in scientific journals so that scientists everywhere can use this information.

EcoHealth Alliance's mission has taken us to the places around the world where viruses originate, in countries that represent our first line of defense against the emergence of novel diseases. After the emergence of SARS in the wildlife markets of South China in 2003, we were funded by NIH to identify the origins of this virus. Our work in foreign countries can only happen with the approval of the US funding agency, and the host country government. In China, with approval from NIH and the State Department, we partnered with the country's leading virology lab in Wuhan to do this work, just as many other US government-funded institutions have done. In over a decade of research we successfully showed that SARS coronavirus originated in bats, that there were hundreds of related viral sequences in the country, and that some coronaviruses were able to bind to human cells, giving them the potential to emerge as epidemics. With funding from USAID, we started to build capacity in China to help prevent

these viruses from spilling over to people. We focused in particular on the wildlife trade that employed over 14 million people in China alone, and provides a high-risk pathway for viruses to emerge. Our work in China provided direct public health benefits to the American people. We were able to obtain actionable public health information from China for over 15 years, with Chinese scientists directly publishing their papers in US-based journals, and uploading their viral genetic sequences to NIH's Genbank database. Importantly, viruses that we identified in bats in China were used by US labs during the COVID pandemic to test drugs, vaccines and therapies that saved countless lives. This long collaboration with Chinese virologists is why the World Health Organization asked me to serve on their taskforce to investigate the origins of COVID-19 in 2021, and why we were able to gain unique access to facilities like the Wuhan Institute of Virology as part of that work.

EcoHealth Alliance's work is a matter of public record, via dozens of scientific publications, media interviews and public lectures given before, during and after the emergence of COVID-19. For years we repeatedly briefed the US government, international agencies and spoke to the press and public about the risk of a coronavirus outbreak originating in China. We worked with labs to develop tools to help prevent the impact of another SARS-like outbreak, and even helped the World Health Organization name SARS-related coronaviruses as one of their Potential Pandemics to push for vaccine and drug development should they emerge. Unfortunately, in late 2019, just as we predicted, a bat-origin SARS-related coronavirus emerged and spread in the city of Wuhan, leading to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Our staff continued to work hard through the pandemic, donating our PPE to hospitals in New York, volunteering to respond to every request for information and advice where we could, as we do to this day, to help agencies here and around the world deal with COVID-19 and prevent future pandemics. We continued this work throughout lockdown and the worst stages of the pandemic, even though some of our loved ones died of the disease, and our children suffered through interruptions to their education.

The public nature of our work and our long-standing collaborations with Chinese scientists made us a target for speculation about the origins of COVID-19, beginning in early 2020, and continuing to this day. Misinformation about our research began to circulate widely through social media and the press, often spread by people with little knowledge or understanding of the science underlying our research. Various myths began to proliferate: these included that EHA did gain-of-function research (we did not – and the NIH itself stipulated that we didn't), that we inserted a furin cleavage site into bat coronaviruses that led to the creation of SARS-CoV-2 (we did not), that our research was unsafe (even though we always adhered to the highest levels of biosafety practices), or that we ignored government oversight of our research and refused to share our results (again, this was simply not true – and now, because of the additional measures that NIH has put in place to monitor our grants, it is fair to say that no other research organization in the U.S. has more oversight than EcoHealth Alliance).

As a consequence of these inaccurate misrepresentations about EcoHealth Alliance and the origins of COVID-19, at a time when the COVID pandemic seemed out of control and emotions were running high, our organization, staff, and even my own family were often targeted with false allegations, death threats, break-ins, media harassment, and other damaging acts. Our organization has gone to great lengths to address allegations head-on, checking our records and stating the facts publicly, and spending substantial staff time devoted to helping identify the origins of COVID. We have been open and transparent in our work, voluntarily meeting with numerous federal agencies to provide information, sharing documents with US federal agencies, House and Senate committees, and cooperating with an audit by the Department of HHS Office of the Inspector General and inquiries by the Government

Accountability Office. We estimate around 15 million pages of EcoHealth Alliance documents, communications, and financial data have been shared through these efforts and other requests to agencies.

Like other public figures, I have personally been targeted, with a white powder letter sent to my home address, devastating online threats and media harassment, and my children and wife's name appearing on a 4Chan "kill list" – among many other incidents now under investigation by the FBI and other authorities. Indeed, between the public announcement by the SSCP of today's hearing (and the Subcommittee's tweets over the past two weeks), we have seen a noticeable increase in death threats and other harassment – culminating in a "SWAT-ing" attack at my home, when the local police received a notice that someone had killed a scientist and had his wife tied up in my basement. Of course, it was a fake call, but we ended up with 6 police cars, and detectives searching the house and staying for the afternoon.

Our funding has also been targeted, even though our research programs continue to be identified as 'high priority' by NIH and other federal agencies. Yet, despite these challenges, we remain committed to our pandemic prevention mission, and to protecting the health of people in the US and globally. We continue to conduct our research, to publish our work in scientific papers, to upload data and viral genetic sequences to NIH's Genbank database -- and US federal agencies continue to identify our proposals as high priority for funding.

Throughout the last four years, EcoHealth Alliance staff, and myself in particular have made repeated statements that the available scientific evidence points towards COVID-19 originating in wildlife (bats) and emerging through the extensive network of wild animal farms and markets in China. This builds on decades of research from around the world that shows around 70% of emerging diseases, and every single pandemic in recorded history is caused by an animal origin pathogen. There are now dozens of scientific papers that provide molecular, epidemiological, wildlife surveillance, and other data supporting this so-called 'zoonotic' origin. At the same time, we have worked extremely hard to try to investigate all hypotheses with an open mind, including re-examining data from our work in China, voluntarily working to inform US agencies investigating COVID origins, and scouring our records to support or refute all hypotheses. To date, there remains no direct verifiable or scientific evidence that COVID originated in a lab. Indeed, the evidence we now have pointing to a zoonotic origin for COVID-19 is far stronger than that available for many previous emerging diseases, which are considered settled science. The politically charged debate over COVID origins threatens to shift focus away from the most likely cause of COVID and other emerging diseases – the unprecedented global trade in wild animals for food, fur and other products, rampant land-use change and other environmental shifts driven by our rapidly developing and unsustainable exploitation of the planet.

These are the tough challenges that we will need to face if we are to prepare successfully for future pandemics, in which COVID-19 will, sadly, almost certainly not be the last to emerge. EcoHealth Alliance's research shows that the next pandemic will almost certainly begin beyond our borders. If we are serious about preventing pandemics, we will have no choice but to work collaboratively with governments in those places where they will most likely begin. Supporting global health research, rather than trying to shut it down, will guarantee the best outcomes for the American people, because it allows

us rapid access to information at the earliest stages of a pandemic so we can act quickly and prevent what begins over there from affecting us here at home.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.