

NIH Presses U.S. Nonprofit for Information on Wuhan Virology Lab; National Institutes of Health told EcoHealth Alliance it must hand over information and materials from Chinese research facility to resume funding for suspended grant

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FULL TEXT

The National Institutes of Health told a small New York-based nonprofit that it must hand over information and materials from a research partner in Wuhan, China, that is under scrutiny by the Trump administration to win back a multimillion-dollar research grant.

Among the items the nonprofit EcoHealth Alliance must provide to resume funding is a sample of the new coronavirus that the Wuhan researchers used to determine its genetic sequence, according to a July 8 letter from the NIH viewed by The Wall Street Journal.

EcoHealth Alliance must also arrange for an inspection of the Wuhan Institute of Virology by an outside team that would examine the facility's lab and records "with specific attention to addressing the question of whether WIV staff had SARS-CoV-2 in their possession prior to December 2019," the U.S. health-research agency's letter said.

"The NIH has received reports that the Wuhan Institute of Virology...has been conducting research at its facilities in China that pose serious bio-safety concerns," read the letter, which was signed by Michael Lauer, the NIH deputy director for extramural research.

"We have concerns that WIV has not satisfied safety requirements under the award, and that EcoHealth Alliance hasn't satisfied its obligations to monitor" its partner to ensure it has complied with regulations regarding the use of the grant money, the letter added.

EcoHealth Alliance, which searches for warning signs of animal viruses that could cause human outbreaks, confirmed it had received the letter.

The NIH said it doesn't discuss internal deliberations on specific grants. Dr. Lauer declined a request for an interview, an NIH spokeswoman said.

The Trump administration has suggested, without providing evidence, that the SARS-CoV-2 virus causing the current pandemic originated in a high-security lab at the Wuhan institute.

Recipients of U.S. government research grants are required to routinely monitor subrecipients to ensure that they are using the money as intended, researchers say.

Yet the NIH doesn't usually set the kinds of conditions it required EcoHealth Alliance to meet, said Heather Pierce, senior director for science policy and regulatory counsel at the Association of American Medical Colleges.

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Jimmy Kolker, a former U.S. ambassador and former assistant secretary for global affairs at the Department of Health and Human Services, said the NIH can routinely ask for reports about the progress of research, including updates on the work of a partner and the safety of its lab, but shouldn't ask about matters outside the scope of the

funded research.

"What they're asking for is intelligence information that will be used for policy-making," he said in an interview. The NIH's list of conditions "is outrageous, especially when a grant has already been carefully evaluated by peer review and addresses one of the most important problems in the world right now—how viruses from animals spill over to human beings," Harold E. Varmus, a former NIH director, said in an interview. "What could be more important at the moment?"

Dr. Varmus is one of 77 Nobel laureates who asked NIH Director Francis Collins and Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar in May to review the NIH's termination of the grant the month before.

"This whole episode is just a woeful attack on the traditional way NIH has maintained its integrity," he said. EcoHealth Alliance responded to the NIH last week, calling the U.S. research agency's suspension unjustified, according to a copy of the letter reviewed by the Journal.

EcoHealth Alliance said in its response that it hadn't sent any grant funds to the Wuhan institute before the grant was suspended, though it has provided funding to the institute in previous years.

The conditions are outside the scope of the grant, said Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, adding that his nonprofit doesn't have access to the information the NIH is seeking.

"Our work is part of protecting the U.S. citizen against diseases like Covid-19," Dr. Daszak said. "It's just so shortsighted to drop that research."

Since 2004, the New York City-based nonprofit has collaborated with Wuhan Institute of Virology researchers and others to study coronaviruses in bats in China and how they infect people, according to EcoHealth Alliance and the nonprofit's published research.

EcoHealth Alliance received a \$3.4 million grant from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in 2014, which the nonprofit used, working with its Wuhan institute collaborators, to study coronaviruses in bats roosting in caves in China and how the viruses infect people.

In one study resulting from that grant, the researchers found evidence that people living near the caves had been infected with viruses resembling the one that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome, the disease that originated in China and caused a deadly epidemic in 2002 and 2003.

The Wuhan institute received \$133,000 each year from EcoHealth Alliance for the first four years of that grant and \$66,000 in the fifth year, according to the nonprofit. The WIV, part of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, is a major research institute focusing on animal and human pathogens. It houses a laboratory that operates at the highest level of biosafety precautions.

The NIAID renewed the EcoHealth Alliance grant last year for another five years, at \$3.7 million.

More on the Pandemic

EcoHealth Alliance planned to use the renewed grant for further study into how often SARS-like viruses in southern China are spilling over to humans and the consequences for public health, Dr. Daszak said.

The Trump administration has expressed concerns about biosafety in China, and U.S. intelligence agencies said in April they were attempting to determine whether a lab accident in Wuhan might have caused a release of the virus. U.S. diplomats in China sent a cable to the State Department in 2018 warning of insufficient safety training at the Wuhan lab, which was conducting research on bat coronaviruses.

The NIH terminated the grant to EcoHealth Alliance in April, saying it didn't believe the work aligned with "program goals and agency priorities," according to a letter the NIH sent that was viewed by the Journal.

The agency reinstated the grant in July but suspended its activities, saying in its July 8 letter to the nonprofit that it must fulfill seven criteria before funding on the grant can resume.

The Wuhan institute sequenced the genome of the new virus in January after receiving patient samples. In addition to requiring EcoHealth Alliance provide a sample of the sequenced coronavirus, the NIH said in its letter that EcoHealth Alliance must "explain the apparent disappearance" of a scientist who worked in the Wuhan lab. The scientist was rumored on some social media to be a "patient zero" of the pandemic. The Wuhan institute has denied that the pandemic began at its facility or among its scientists. The institute said in a statement earlier this

year that the scientist in question was a graduate student who went to work elsewhere after receiving her master's degree.

The NIH also ordered EcoHealth Alliance to explain purported restrictions at the Wuhan institute, including "diminished cell-phone traffic in October 2019, and the evidence that there may have been roadblocks surrounding the facility from October 14-19, 2019."

The U.S. research agency also asked EcoHealth Alliance to provide it with the Wuhan institute's response to the safety concerns described in the 2018 cable sent to the State Department.

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