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Bioterror Failures Criticized In Report

Panel: White House not addressing threat

By Mimi Hall, USA Today

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is working hard to curb nuclear threats but failing to address the more urgent and immediate threat of biological terrorism, a bipartisan commission created by Congress is reporting today.

The report obtained by USA TODAY cites failures on biosecurity policy by the White House, which the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction says has left the country vulnerable. The commission, created last year to address concerns raised by post-9/11 investigations, warns that anthrax spores released by a crop-duster could "kill more Americans than died in World War II" and the economic impact could exceed \$1.8 trillion in cleanup and other costs.

The government's efforts "have not kept pace with the increasing capabilities and agility of those who would do harm to the United States," the report says. "The consequences of ignoring these warnings could be dire." Says commission Chairman Bob Graham, a Democratic former senator from Florida: "The clock is ticking."

White House spokesman Nick Shapiro said protecting the nation from deadly weapons is among President Obama's "top national security priorities."

Among the commission's criticisms:

*President Obama's National Security Council has no senior political appointees with a biodefense background. "That was not the case in the Clinton and Bush administrations," the report says.

*Programs created after the 9/11 attacks to develop and buy vaccines and drugs to prevent and respond to a biological attack are not being funded adequately. Although the report is critical of the White House on this topic, Congress has the power of the purse. The report cites a funding shortage for a program to ensure there are enough drugs to respond to a bioterrorist attack.

The Obama administration asked for \$305 million in its fiscal 2010 budget request.

"Insufficient by a factor of 10," the report says.

*Disease surveillance programs fall short.

The government needs to invest in rapid diagnostic tests to "improve the nation's ability to treat people by providing a more timely and accurate diagnosis" — something that can be critical to treating the victim of a biological attack.

Shapiro says the government is spending \$3.5 billion to protect the public from the H1N1 flu and is "carefully evaluating" broader "all-hazards" spending.

Commission Vice Chairman Jim Talent, a Republican former senator from Missouri, says: "The fact is, it is only getting easier and cheaper to develop and use biological weapons. ... It is essential that the U.S. government move more aggressively."

