

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 5, 2016

The Honorable Deborah Lee James
Secretary of the Air Force
U.S. Department of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Secretary James:

I write out of concern for the growing spread of the Zika virus within the United States and the lack of a comprehensive federal strategy to protect the public against the Zika virus and other rapidly spreading infectious diseases. Emerging infectious diseases constitute a clear and persistent threat to the health and well-being of U.S. citizens. The rapid pace at which global disease outbreaks have occurred in recent years demonstrates the critical need for the federal government to have a whole of government approach to stop infectious disease.

To date the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has reported 426 known cases of Zika in the United States and 599 in U.S. territories. The Zika virus is known to transmit rapidly through mosquito bites and sexual transmission. However, the World Health Organization has indicated that detecting Zika is complicated by several factors, including a “relatively small proportion of infected people develop symptoms (estimates range from 1 in 4 to 1 in 5); the virus is detectable for only a few days in an infected person’s bloodstream; and current tests cannot definitively distinguish Zika from similar viruses, such as dengue and chikungunya.” This could mean that the number of infected people in the United States is five times greater than believed.

As of February 2016, a large ongoing outbreak in Brazil has infected an estimated 4,000 people, up from just 150 cases in previous years. The outbreak in the United States started later than Brazil, but has already reported 426 infected victims. The United States government, with the help of the Department of Defense (DoD) and Air Force, must take every precaution necessary to prevent a Brazil-like Zika escalation.

The DoD tasks the 910th Airlift Wing (910th) at Youngstown Air Reserve Station (YARS), Ohio to maintain the DoD’s only large area fixed-wing aerial spray capability to control disease-carrying insects, pest insects, undesirable vegetation and to disperse oil spills in large bodies of water. After Hurricane Katrina passed through the Gulf Region, the DoD called out this capability to spray insecticide in the Gulf Region to suppress insect borne disease. The 910th returned to the Gulf in May of 2010 to spray dispersant on the oil released following the sinking of the Deepwater Horizon. The 910th currently has six entomologists serving as the Air Force’s representatives to the DoD Pest Management Board for the purpose of advising on airborne vector control procedures. These entomologists are the DoD’s only certified aerial spray applicators and are consequently widely resourced across the government for their expertise.

Last month, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs held a hearing titled *The Federal Perspective on the State of Our Nation’s Biodefense* during which I asked Rear Admiral Redd, Director, Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response at the CDC, about the need to maintain this critical

capability and how the 910th could assist in mosquito abatement. In response to my question Dr. Redd stated, “[o]ne of the things that we think is really important that the Zika virus outbreak is pointing out is the need to really revitalize those mosquito control efforts...”

Despite their critical mission capabilities, the Air Force continues to reduce the 910th's funding and resources. In 2013 the Air Force reduced their aircraft from 12 to 8 causing the 910th to decommission two squadrons. As a consequence, the 910th was left with significantly less resources to conduct both the aerial spray mission and a tactical airlift mission. When they deploy to the Middle East in the fall to perform their tactical airlift mission they will not have the resources or capability to support their aerial spray mission requirement. Therefore, the United States will not have a large area fixed-wing aerial spray capability during their deployment.

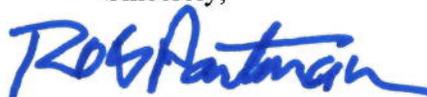
As a member of the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, I am tasked with the responsibility of securing the nation from the many threats we face, including communicable diseases that pose the threat of national emergency. In that capacity, I request a response to following questions:

1. Have there been any requests to the Air Force by the administration or other government departments or agencies to use the 910th aerial spraying capability to control the spread of the Zika virus?
2. Given the 910th's tactical airlift mission and pending deployment to the Middle East at a time when the country may require their critical aerial spraying capability, is the Air Force reconsidering their decision to reduce their aircraft? If not, why?
3. How will the 910th support the aerial spray mission while deployed for their tactical airlift mission next year?
4. Following the Deep Water Horizon oil spill in 2010 the 910th submitted a Pre-Scripted Mission Assignment (PSMA) designation for the aerial spraying mission. What is the status of their PSMA? It has been five years, do you expect further delay?
5. With the growing threat of communicable diseases spread through mosquitoes, why has the Air Force not requested additional funding to revitalize the aerial spraying mission in their recent budget submission, but, instead, placed it on the unfunded priority list?

I remain very concerned about the spread of the Zika Virus in the United States and am increasingly concerned that the Air Force has reduced its capabilities to fight communicable diseases at a time when the threat continues to grow.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any questions or concerns, please have your staff contact Don Bergin, National Security Advisor and Counsel at (202) 224-3353.

Sincerely,



Rob Portman
United States Senator