

Statement for the Record from the American Phytopathological Society

Submitted to the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Emergency
Management and Technology

Hearing entitled, “Surveying the Threat of Agroterrorism: Perspectives on Food,
Agriculture, and Veterinary Defense.”

September 16, 2025

On behalf of The American Phytopathological Society (APS), we want to thank you for holding this important hearing.

The American Phytopathological Society (APS) is a non-profit, professional organization of 3,600 plant pathology scientists and practitioners whose work safeguards agriculture, food security, and the national ecosystem to prevent billions of dollars in crop losses in the U.S. each year. Spanning industry, academia, government, and private practice, APS members study and manage plant pathogens, pests, and diseases to ensure healthy plants thrive in crops of all types across all 50 states. Many of our members lead and work within the National Plant Diagnostic Network (NPDN), a cornerstone of U.S. agricultural biosecurity and plant health infrastructure. Ensuring the longevity of NPDN is a top priority for our society.

The United States food and agriculture system is a high-value target for adversaries who may seek to cause disruption, economic harm, or public panic. Plant pathogens and pests can serve as powerful tools in the wrong hands: they are invisible to the untrained eye, spread rapidly, and can devastate crops essential to our economy and food supply. The early detection of these threats is critical to prevent catastrophic consequences.

Plant systems are the foundation for local to global food security; humans and food animals eat plants. Plant and animal systems are mutually dependent and fully integrated. Our experience shows that major disruptions to plant-based food production systems result in increased food costs with negative food security consequences for low-income earners. The animal systems that depend on plant production systems for feed will also be negatively impacted through increased feed costs and decreased availability. Disruptions to plant systems by the intentional or accidental introduction of biological agents will impact both plant and animal systems with subsequent impacts to food security and the economy. Plant-based agricultural exports are a critical component to achieving balanced trade; introduced biological agents will disrupt exports potentially further increasing the currently widening trade deficit.

NPDN was established in 2002 in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks to ensure the nation could quickly detect and respond to biological threats to plants. Today, it

is a highly respected consortium of over 70 diagnostic laboratories across all regions of the United States, and a trusted partner to USDA's Plant Protection and Quarantine Agency and state departments of agriculture. NPDN is managed through USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and executed by land-grant universities, state departments of agriculture, and other partners.

NPDN enables real-time communication and coordination among federal agencies, state partners, diagnosticians, growers, and regulators. Its laboratories provide rapid, science-based diagnostic services. It also serves as a focus of expertise in biosecurity, surveillance and epidemiology. This allows the U.S. to maintain vigilance not only against intentional attacks, but also against naturally occurring invasive species and emerging pathogens.

Despite its critical mission and vital impact, NPDN operates under severe resource constraints. In 2017, Congress was advised that NPDN required an annual budget of \$15 million to meet its mission. In agreement, the 2018 Farm Bill authorized funding at this level. Regardless of this budget need, NPDN continues to receive barely over \$3 million annually through discretionary funds, forcing laboratories to limit participation or withdraw from the network, and limiting the network's ability to collaborate with state and federal partners in new initiatives for capacity building and enhanced surveillance.

The chronic funding shortfall significantly weakens our national defense posture over time. Without adequate resources, NPDN cannot fully support state and federal agencies such as USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), nor can it maintain the skilled workforce needed to respond swiftly to new and emerging threats. For perspective, the rising costs of lab consumables and technologies mean that today's dollars buy significantly less capacity than when NPDN was first funded.

APS strongly urges Congress to:

- Appropriate \$15 million annually for NPDN, consistent with the authorization in the 2018 Farm Bill.
- Ensure that NPDN remains a dedicated, sustainable program line within USDA-NIFA rather than relying on unstable discretionary funding.
- Recognize NPDN as an essential component of U.S. homeland security by protecting plant health, food security, and trade.

We appreciate that you are holding this important hearing and giving APS the opportunity to highlight the importance of the National Plant Diagnostic Network. APS and our members

stand ready to work with you to ensure the resilience of our agricultural systems and the security of our food supply.