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CRS Issue Statement on R&D to Enhance Homeland Security

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The federal government invests in research and development (R&D) to improve the government's ability to prevent, respond to, and recover from terrorist attacks. Given the diverse nature of current and future terrorist threats, homeland security R&D involves nearly every scientific and technical discipline. In addition to conducting and sponsoring much of this R&D, the government is leveraging its investment by encouraging the private sector to similarly invest. Congress continues to face difficult decisions regarding funding, prioritizing, coordinating, and executing the federal government homeland security R&D agenda.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-296) gave the Directorate of Science and Technology within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) responsibility for most DHS R&D-related activities. This Directorate has been reorganized multiple times since its inception and has received intense congressional scrutiny. How DHS prioritizes, coordinates, and executes its R&D agenda remains an oversight issue for Congress.

The federal government has decided to expand the nation's ability to study dangerous pathogens through building additional specialized federal laboratories and encouraging the expansion of similar laboratory capacity in academia. Beyond traditional policy debate regarding appropriate R&D funding levels, these facilities may raise other cross-governmental policy issues. These include how federal facilities fit into a national homeland security R&D plan; how and by whom such a plan should be articulated; the appropriate scope of homeland security R&D work performed in federal laboratories versus academic or industry laboratories; and the appropriate level of government oversight on biological laboratories in the public, private, and academic sectors.

In December 2008, the congressionally chartered Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Proliferation and Terrorism published its recommendations to reduce the likelihood of a WMD terrorist attack and to improve the nation's capacity to respond to an attack. The 111th Congress is considering legislation that would enact the Commission's recommendations and would directly affect how the government and private sector perform homeland security research and development.

Recent Congresses have enacted several measures to encourage private sector investment in homeland security R&D. Actions such as guaranteeing a government market for medical countermeasures through Project BioShield and creating a new office in the Department of Health and Human Services to encourage private industry to develop medical countermeasures have been taken, but the success or failure of these attempts remain undetermined. The success of these efforts rests largely on their effective implementation; therefore Congress is likely to continue to play a key oversight role. Additionally, Congress is likely to consider additional legislation to improve current programs, to address remaining barriers to private sector homeland security innovation, and further increase government and private sector synergies.

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