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United States Senate

CHARLES E. GRASSLEY

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March 30, 2010

REPLY TO:

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The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The work of the National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL) and Center for Veterinary Biologics (CVB) is a critical component of the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) mission area. These two labs efforts are essential to the promotion of animal health in ensuring that animal diseases are diagnosed and eradicated, and that vaccines are safe, effective and readily available to livestock producers, veterinarians, and pet owners for the critical task of disease prevention. It seems logical that these two vital labs are located in the heart of livestock country in Ames, Iowa.

However, over many years I have continued to hear complaints from both employees of these labs and from companies who these labs regulate, concerning procedure and management issues. I was pleased to see that on May 19, 2009, APHIS released an independent review of the NVSL and CVB which contained recommendations on ways to improve management and culture at both of these labs. I was not pleased however, with the findings included in this report.

Issues of particular concern that were raised from the culture survey in which employees participated include lack of leadership, disrespectful and unprofessional behavior, a lack of accountability and favoritism, and ineffective communication and decision making. Surprisingly these issues were cited by two to three times the number of employees concerned with high workloads, suggesting that problems are much deeper and greater than simply inadequate resources and funding for CVB and NVSL. These results clearly indicate a need for greater transparency and accountability within the agency.

The independent review included five recommendations for NVSL and CVB improvement:

- Recommendation #1: Address the gap between the current state of the culture and the state described as ideal for the organization.
- Recommendation #2: Conduct a system-wide effort to rebuild trust and create a shared sense of accountability within and throughout the organization.
- Recommendation #3: Increase the capability of NVSL and CVB leaders in the short-term and as part of a longer-term leadership and management development strategy.

RANKING MEMBER,
FINANCE

Committee Assignments:

BUDGET
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INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS
CONTROL CAUCUS

- Recommendation #4: Assess organizational barriers, such as organizational structure, and current employee and management workloads, that could prevent a successful shift to the described ideal culture.
- Recommendation #5: Foster employee engagement through an appreciative process that connects to the organization's sense of pride and work ethic.

I would appreciate an update concerning the progress of implementing these recommendations and what specific action items APHIS has taken and plans to take to address these serious issues. How will progress be measured, and what steps are planned as a contingency if progress in resolving these serious issues is not achieved? It is of the utmost importance that these labs set the gold standard for animal health. Farmers, the animal health industry, and our trading partners depend on it. Please contact Amanda Taylor on my staff at 202-224-3744 with any questions.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator