

# NIH lifts suspension of EcoHealth Alliance and reinstates grant to study bat coronaviruses in China

## Part one of two

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*Viruses have no citizenship, no political affiliation; they are indiscriminate in the harm they cause. Because of this, when one of us is threatened by a deadly virus, so too are all of us—EcoHealth Alliance, April 2020*

More than three years after former President Donald Trump’s administration suspended EcoHealth Alliance’s (EHA) National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant for studying bat coronaviruses in China, on May 8, 2023 the non-profit international research organization announced that their project “received a renewal grant from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious diseases (NIAID) of the NIH.”

In the early months of 2020, the inaction on COVID-19 on the part of the Trump administration led to horrific consequences as bodies began to pile high in New York City hospitals. To provide political cover (and assist its anti-China global strategy), the Trump administration latched on to the lab-leak conspiracy that was being promoted by Steve Bannon and “dissident” Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui (currently being prosecuted for \$1 billion in fraud) and used it to make the issue of the pandemic a referendum on China. The EHA became the scapegoat in the promotion of the “big lie” about the “China virus.”

On April 24, 2020, the NIH sent a letter to EHA’s CEO, Peter Daszak, that their grant had been terminated without cause, an unprecedented move that was denounced by principled scientists as politically motivated. Then in a letter dated July 8, 2020, the NIH said the grant would be reinstated but suspended, pending answers to questions that were clearly designed to put EHA in the hot seat and force them to become an instrument in the US foreign policy against China.

A source close to EHA and Daszak explained that “the NIH tried to dangle the possibility of reissuing the award to extract information from Chinese collaborators that would have put Daszak and his staff at risk of being arrested as spies.” He added, “EHA attorneys protested these maneuvers carefully by explaining that these questions fall in the realm of intelligence agencies and not grantees, like EHA, who are tasked with scientific collaboration” (link provided here).

The vindication for EHA, which has had to traverse a highly

charged climate of right-wing reaction and geopolitical brinksmanship on the origin of COVID to ensure their study could see the light of day again, was no small matter. At every turn of events in the political developments used to promote the patently false lab leak hypothesis, EHA was drawn into the center of this maelstrom and repeatedly scapegoated, defamed and threatened.

As the CEO of EHA, Peter Daszak, said with a sense of some relief on being able to continue the project, “Now we have the ability to finally get back to work.”

The EHA’s more than three years of highly critical work in understanding the pandemic potentials of coronaviruses has been stalled amid unsubstantiated accusations that EHA used NIH funding to conduct dangerous “gain-of-function” experiments together with the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). The resumption of the grant comes with significant caveats which will impact future collaborative work with Chinese scientists and international collaboration, essentially holding science hostage to political gamesmanship.

The original grant, titled “Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence,” had been issued in 2014 and renewed in 2019. The scope of the work, in hindsight of the COVID pandemic that emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019, is remarkably prescient and remains highly relevant. But this was based on previous ongoing critical work on the question of pathogens with pandemic potential. In particular the SARS-CoV-1 global epidemic had been a wake-up call for many in the field to begin an extensive examination both in the field and in the laboratory on the nature of these viruses.

The original EHA grant from 2014 had stated, “This project will examine the risk of future coronavirus (CoV) emergence from wildlife using in-depth field investigations across the human-wildlife interface in China, molecular characterization of novel CoVs and host receptor binding domain genes, mathematical models of transmission and evolution, and in-vitro and in-vivo laboratory studies of host range. Zoonotic CoVs are a significant threat to global health. ... Bats appear to be the natural reservoir of these viruses, and hundreds of novel bat CoVs have been discovered in the last two decades. Bats, and other wildlife species,

are hunted, traded, butchered, and consumed across Asia, creating a large-scale human-wildlife interface, and high-risk of future emergence of novel CoVs.”

The project intended to quantify the risks of spillover events, identify emerging disease hotspots across China and develop predictive models that could be tested and used in developing pandemic preparedness and prevention infrastructure. The establishment of multiple Biosafety level-three and level-four laboratories in these regions attests to the need to have resources available on the ground.

However, these developments are being decried by the US government as national security threats that need immediate oversight, as noted in a recent April 27, 2023, House Committee on Energy and Commerce Committee hearing on “Biosafety and Risk Research.”

Nearly every Republican member reasserted the absurd and unproven allegation that the virus was leaked from the Wuhan lab, and that EHA and NIH should be held accountable for working there. These hearings are pure political shows that attempt to reinforce US hegemony against China, with pandemic preparedness and the necessary infrastructure to be overseen by the state apparatus.

According to *Science*, “The new four-year grant is a stripped down version of the original grant to the EcoHealth Alliance, a nonprofit research organization in New York City, providing \$576,000 per year. That 2014 award included funding for controversial experiments that mixed parts of different bat viruses related to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the coronavirus that sparked a global outbreak in 2002-04, and included a subaward to the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). The new award omits those studies, and also imposes extensive new accounting rules on EcoHealth, which drew criticism from government auditors for its bookkeeping practices.”

The work on the current grant will not include WIV beyond the previous submission of 300 whole or partial sequences of bat coronaviruses that had been provided from its collections. EHA will analyze them using its computer programs to determine which have concerning features and collaborate with their partner, Linfa Wang’s lab at Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore, to assess if the spike proteins of these viruses can bind to the ACE2 human receptor. Additionally, EHA will continue analyzing previously collected samples to assess for previous spillover events in the local population. Furthermore, their funding and progress reports will be the basis for frequent scrutiny and queries.

In a report written on the day EHA announced their reinstatement, *Nature* wrote, “Although the organization will now be able to continue its bat coronavirus research for the first time since the saga began, the NIH placed an extensive list of restrictions on the four-year, \$2.9 million, award. None of the researchers who spoke to *Nature* had ever seen a grant with so many stipulations.”

The same source familiar with EHA and speaking on the condition of anonymity said, “These are onerous conditions that will make it hard to do the work, because it will increase the time it takes to set up contacts, process reimbursements. EHA already has demands on its staff to produce documents for two congressional and one Senate committee, other invasive oversight

actions that are in response to Republicans’ false allegations, lawsuits, and dozens of Freedoms of Information Act requests. All these political actions together are tying down scientists and getting in the way of them doing their job of analyzing where the next pandemic is likely to originate and stopping it.”

EHA employs several dozen scientists and 17 support staff and conducts research in more than 40 other countries. It has no lab and partners with national institutions to conduct these studies. It has identified more than 1,000 viruses and published hundreds of high-impact papers on these topics. Back in 2004, when Daszak began working on pandemic potential pathogens, he told *60 Minutes*, “What worries me the most is that we are going to miss the next emerging disease, that we’re suddenly going to find a SARS virus that moves from one part of the planet to another, wiping out people as it moves along.”

The political pressure on EcoHealth Alliance is intense, yet investigations by both the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) and the Office of Inspector General (OIG) of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have exonerated Peter Daszak and have found only minor mistakes in some of EHA’s grant administration.

In response to a demand by three members of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Representatives Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA), the Republican chair, Brett Guthrie (R-KY) and Morgan Griffith (R-VA), to expel conservation biologist Peter Daszak from the prestigious NAM, a member of the academy told the media that the probe was from the beginning “frivolous” and politically motivated.

After an 18-month investigation into NIH’s sudden and unprecedented termination/suspension of EHA’s grant on April 24, 2020, OIG said they hadn’t found any significant issues with EHA’s grant oversight and compliance, noting that “EcoHealth had steps in place to conduct risk assessments of its subrecipients [WIV], and also had standardized checklists to document routine monitoring of its subrecipients.”

The minor complaints made by the OIG, such as the \$89,171 in unallowable costs that amounts to roughly 1 percent of the NIH grants awarded to EHA, are common with such grants and are minor infractions in the complicated bureaucratic process, easily verifiable and corrected.

The other complaints regarding timeliness in submitting EHA’s progress report for year five of the grant from the NIAID have been thoroughly refuted in letters from EHA to the inspector general of NIH and would not affect the scientific value of the work being conducted. As EHA wrote, “At no time then or until well after this grant was terminated in April 2020, was there any comment from NIH regarding experimental results or the timing of the report.”

*To be continued*



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