

From: Wendy McGuinness <wmcg@mcguinnessinstitute.org>
Date: Tuesday, 15 June 2021 at 11:03 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: OIA 2021/11: ERMA 200223 AgResearch's Ten year report

Kia ora [REDACTED],

OIA 2021/11: ERMA 200223 AgResearch's Ten year report

Thank you for providing a link to the ten-year annual report (below).

I have now had the opportunity to review the report. It raises a number of issues that require further investigation. Can you please advise what actions the EPA are planning to take in response to this report? Please treat this email as a request under the Official Information Act (our OIA 2021/11).

Background

The work programme at the Institute tends to focus on low-probability/high-magnitude events that could deliver long-term irreversible impacts. We believe the risks of this group of experiments being undertaken by AgResearch outweigh any potential benefits, particularly given recent events. The test for the EPA is to consider a reassessment based on current information and that includes taking onto account the current risk appetite of New Zealanders.

Given COVID-19, we believe the Prime Minister, MPs, scientists and the wider public are now better able to appreciate the nature of these types of risks, and as such, will likely have a lower risk appetite than they did when the application was originally heard in 2010/2011.

In particular, we believe COVID-19 has made New Zealanders better appreciate the impact of a pandemic on the health and wellbeing of our people, the risks to our economy and more generally supply-chain risk. Recent events have also shown how a potential leak/escape/faulty experiment from a publicly-funded institution might negatively impact on our country's reputation. Given this, there is a desire by many experts in the field to put in place better scrutiny and accountability over experiments, that the knowledge sought by such experiments must be worth the risks, and that knowledge, once gained, must be used for all members of society (not just a select few who profit in terms of financial rewards or scientific reputation). In other words, risks, costs and benefits should be both understood and shared equally.

To this end, we are reminded of the theory that SARS-COV-2 originated from a laboratory. For example, a recent Economist article, dated 29 May 2021, notes:

'Pathogens escape from institutions working on them with depressing frequency. The last known death from smallpox was a result of a laboratory leak in Britain in 1978. SARS-COV-1, the virus which caused SARS, escaped from a laboratory twice as it spread around the world in 2003, once in Singapore and once in Taiwan; it leaked out of a Beijing lab on two separate occasions in 2004. In December 2019 more than 100 students and staff at two agricultural research centres in Lanzhou were struck with an outbreak of brucellosis, a bacterial disease usually caught from livestock.

Most alarmingly, the H1N1 strain of influenza which started spreading around the world in 1977 is now known to have been released from a north-east Asian Lab...'

Recent research on zoonotic transmission is also relevant. For example, a 20 May 2021 article ‘Evolution, Ecology, and Zoonotic Transmission of Betacoronaviruses: A Review’, found [here](#), notes:

‘Viruses account for ~25–44% of all emerging infectious diseases and present an increased risk of zoonotic transmission ... Zoonotic virus to human transmission and the number of viral-based infections has been steadily increasing, prompting a worldwide investigation of potential zoonotic pathogens, not only to understand current zoonoses but, more importantly, to also identify potential future transmissions of viral pathogens between animals and humans.’

The world, in our view, has changed. The EPA has a responsibility under law to make decisions based on current information, taking into account what we now know (and do not know) about risks, costs and benefits.

We look forward to hearing how the EPA plans to respond to AgResearch’s 10-year report and the resulting reassessment process. For the record, the Institute would welcome the opportunity to engage in any public consultation processes.

Many thanks, Wendy

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