

Biden asks intelligence officials to investigate COVID-19 origin

BY ZEKE MILLER AND AAMER MADHANI
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Wednesday asked U.S. intelligence officials to “redouble” their efforts to investigate the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, including any possibility the trail might lead to a Chinese lab.



“The United States will also keep working with like-minded partners around the world to press China to participate in a full, transparent, evidence-based international investigation and to provide access to all relevant data and evidence.”

— President Joe Biden

After months of minimizing that possibility as a fringe theory, the Biden administration is responding to both U.S. and world pressure for China to be more open about the outbreak.

Biden asked U.S. intelligence agencies to report back on their findings within 90 days. He directed U.S. national laboratories to assist with the investigation and called on China to cooperate with international probes into the origins of the pandemic.

Republicans, including former President Donald Trump, have promoted the theory that the virus emerged from a laboratory accident rather than naturally through human contact with an infected animal.

Biden in a statement said the majority of the intelligence community had “coalesced” around those two likely sce-

narios but “do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other.” He revealed that two agencies lean toward the animal link and “one leans more toward” the lab theory, adding, “each with low or moderate confidence.”

“The United States will also keep working with like-minded partners around the world to press China to participate in a full, transparent, evidence-based international investigation and to provide access to all relevant data and evidence,” said Biden.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday that the White House supports a new World Health Organization investigation in China, but she added that an effective probe “would require China finally stepping up and allowing access needed to determine the origins.”

Biden still held out the possibility that a firm conclusion may never be reached, given the Chinese government’s refusal to fully cooperate with international investigations.

“The failure to get our inspectors on the ground in those early months will always hamper any investigation into the origin of COVID-19,” he said.

Administration officials still harbor strong doubts about the lab leak theory. They view China’s refusal to cooperate in the investigation — particularly on something of such magnitude — as emblematic of other irresponsible actions on the world stage.

Privately, administration officials say the end result, if ever known, won’t change anything, but note China’s stonewalling is now on display for the world to see.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, a White

House coronavirus adviser, said Wednesday that he and most others in the scientific community “believe that the most likely scenario is that this was a natural occurrence, but one knows that 100 percent for sure.”

“And since there’s a lot of concern, a lot of speculation and since no one absolutely knows that, I believe we do need the kind of investigation where there’s open transparency and all the information that’s available, to be made available, to scrutinize,” Fauci said at a Senate hearing.

Andy Slavitt, Biden’s senior adviser for the coronavirus, said Tuesday that the world needs to “get to the bottom ... whatever the answer may be.”

“We need a completely transparent process from China; we need the WHO to assist in that matter,” Slavitt said. “We don’t feel like we have that now.”



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

A wolf pack is captured by a remote camera in Hells Canyon National Recreation Area in northeast Oregon near the Idaho border in 2017.

New wolf killing laws trigger push to revive federal protections

BY MATTHEW BROWN
Associated Press

Wildlife advocates pressed the Biden administration on Wednesday to revive federal protections for gray wolves across the Northern Rockies after Republican lawmakers in Idaho and Montana made it much easier to kill the predators.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Humane Society and Sierra Club filed a legal petition asking Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to use her emergency authority to return thousands of wolves in the region to protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Republican lawmakers pushed through legislation in recent weeks that would allow hunters and trappers to kill unlimited numbers of wolves in Idaho and Montana using aggressive tactics such as shooting them from ATVs and helicopters, hunting with night-vision scopes and setting lethal snares that some consider inhumane. Idaho’s law also allows the state to hire private contractors to kill wolves.

Wolves in the region lost federal endangered protections in 2011 under an act of Con-

gress after the species had rebounded from widespread extermination last century.

The new laws had been opposed by some former wildlife officials and reflect an increasingly partisan approach to predator management in state houses that are dominated by Republicans. Supporters of restoring protections say the changes will tip the scales and drive down wolf numbers to unsustainable levels, while also threatening packs in nearby states that have interconnected populations.

They argue the changes violated the terms that allowed state management of wolves, and want Haaland to act before the looser hunting rules start going into effect in Idaho on July 1.

Wednesday’s petition seeks to restore protections across all or portions of at least six states — Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon and a small area of northern Utah. It steps up pressure on the administration over wolf populations that were declared recovered when President Joe Biden served as vice president under former President Barack Obama.

Oregon Senate passes \$9.3B school funding plan

BY HILLARY BORRUD
The Oregonian

A \$9.3 billion plan to fund Oregon schools for the next two years is headed to the state House after the Senate passed it on a bipartisan vote with little debate Tuesday.

The state school fund budget includes \$300 million more than necessary to maintain current level K-12 ser-

vices and programs, legislative analysts said.

That proposed funding level sparked controversy earlier this month, when Gov. Kate Brown sent a letter to legislative leaders urging them not to pump more money into the state’s funding system in which districts receive formula-based distributions to spend as they decide.

Advocates for educational equity have been pushing for the state to overhaul the funding system to target more investments to historically underserved students, including kids in poverty and students of color.

Lawmakers have discussed potential changes in private meetings this session but opted not to make any

changes to Senate Bill 5514, which the Senate approved Tuesday.

If the House passes the \$9.3 billion budget, this will be at least the fourth biennium in a row that the Legislature will have approved a larger state school fund than legislative analysts said was necessary to continue current services and programs.

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