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Description



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FOIA docs shows EcoHealth Alliance President Peter Daszak frequently communicated with NIAID officials, passing along talking points for Fauci and asking for help

By [Greg Piper](#)

The project leader for several taxpayer-funded studies of Chinese bats and coronaviruses predicted the COVID-19 outbreak would max out at 20,000 cases, most of which would be

“mild,” according to largely unredacted emails provided to Just the News under the Freedom of Information Act.

They show EcoHealth Alliance President Peter Daszak frequently communicated with National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) officials from January-May 2020. The often-chummy messages provide his initially rosy projections, update them on his media interviews and suggest what Director Anthony Fauci should tell reporters.

He also sought their help getting EcoHealth’s research deemed “essential” during New York City’s lockdown and combating [“conspiracy theories”](#) that later harmed Daszak’s work, including the lab-leak theory that [experts considered plausible from the start](#).

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) email dump coincides with new scrutiny on its parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), for failing to investigate alleged criminal behavior by EcoHealth Alliance.

HHS confirmed to former Senate Finance Committee investigator [Paul Thacker](#) that Inspector General Christi Grimm is not investigating EcoHealth grants despite requests from House and Senate Republicans following [NIH claims that EcoHealth didn’t comply](#) with grant conditions in connection with [unintentional gain-of-function research](#).

The FBI launched an inquiry into an NIH grant to EcoHealth, as documented in a [May 2020 email](#) from an NIH investigations officer to an FBI agent. The email, obtained by The Intercept, provided fully redacted responses to FBI questions from Daszak’s program officer at NIAID, Erik Stemmy. Thacker said NIH didn’t respond when asked if it was still working with the FBI.

While Her Own Agents Protect Anthony Fauci, Inspector General Appears Frightened of Investigating the National Institutes of Health <https://t.co/1qdgNS2tiS> Despite multiple criminal referrals from Congress and the NIH, Inspector General will only audit grants for performance /1 pic.twitter.com/tBIl5sqSzt

— Paul D. Thacker (@thackerpd) [May 17, 2022](#)

In their first communication since July 2019, Stemmy asked Daszak on Jan. 7, 2020 what his China contacts were saying about the “Wuhan pneumonia cases.” Daszak promised to tell him “off the record.”

Hours after a call the next day that included Alan Embry, then the Respiratory Disease Branch chief, [The Wall Street Journal broke news](#) about a “new strain of coronavirus.” Daszak assured Stemmy the story had “no more [details] than I gave you today.”

Fauci’s handful of appearances in the emails suggest the nation’s chief infectious disease specialist still knew little about the new virus by the end of January. His senior adviser David Morens asked Daszak Jan. 9 for “any inside info” on the new virus that wasn’t yet public.

“I’ve been talking to reporters today,” Daszak responded seven minutes later, adding that he would be happy to share with Morens as well. (“V. busy right now dealing with journalists,” Daszak told Stemmy

Jan. 22.)

In a Jan. 27 email to Morens and Stemmy, Daszak suggested a phone call about “the Wuhan CoV,” one of many [allegedly racist references](#) in the emails to COVID’s geographic origin. He asked Morens to share background on his Chinese bat research with “Tony Fauci for when he’s being interviewed” about COVID.

“Great info, thanks,” Morens responded. “Tony doesn’t maintain awareness of these things and doesn’t know unless program officers tell him, which they rarely do, since they are across town and may not see him more than once a year, or less [...] I WILL pass this on to Tony.”

The next sentence is redacted. Morens continued: “Interested in your feeling about where this is going” on a scale of “doomsday and not that big a deal.”

Daszak responded with his “confidential” assessment. The current mortality rate is 2-3%, which is “not bad” compared to severe acute respiratory syndrome, and there is “no evidence” of new transmission in destination countries, though “richer countries” can “mop up secondary cases” if they get through.

He praised China for “open sharing of information” and its “remarkable” New Year’s lockdowns in Wuhan and other cities, which “has to have had a big impact on reducing spread.” Beyond the maximum 20,000 cases, Daszak predicted “only a couple of examples of secondary transmission” and an eventual 1-2% mortality rate.

A “temporary shock to the global economy” is expected, due to “massive increase in travel from China” since SARS and “increase in social media and hype,” he wrote. “Should settle down once we’re over the peak of the epidemic curve.”

Daszak started warning about conspiracy theories after the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) asked the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) to set up a “standing committee” on emerging infectious diseases.

OSTP Director Kelvin Droegemeier said one of its tasks would be combating “misinformation,” citing a [non-peer-reviewed study](#) that found “4 unique inserts” in the virus “unlikely to be fortuitous in nature.” NASEM member Daszak told Stemmy and Embry they should be involved too.

After he gave an agency presentation on EcoHealth’s unpublished work on “likely hotspots for evolution” of the virus, Daszak asked Stemmy for a private conversation about “totally unfounded” conspiracy theories “currently flying around” on COVID origins, in case “anyone asks for clarification” from Stemmy.

Three days later, Daszak asked Stemmy and Division of Microbiology and Infectious Diseases Director Emily Erbelding to “pass on my personal thanks” to Fauci for [knocking down the lab-leak theory](#). The duo would soon help Daszak with the most serious threat to his work.

NIH Deputy Director for Extramural Research Michael Lauer instructed EcoHealth April 19 to cut off the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) from subgrants, due to reports of COVID possibly leaking from its lab.

The letter went to the nonprofit’s research chief Kevin Olival but also Naomi Schrag, Columbia University vice president of research compliance, because [Olival’s faculty page](#) lists EcoHealth as his

“affiliation/department.”

Responding to Lauer, Daszak promised “no funds” from the NIH grant had gone to WIV and acknowledged “political concerns” about COVID’s origins but defended the scientific merit of his organization’s work with WIV. “It is quite remarkable” that three of five vaccine candidates in human trials were developed in China, he wrote.

A week later, Daszak warned Stemmy and Erbelding that Politico would break the story of NIH cutting off WIV. “We’ve tried to avoid this, but it looks like it’s beyond our control now,” he said. “I won’t be talking to reporters.”

He shared the news the next day with participants in NIAID’s “weekly investigator call” and asked to continue participating, “unfunded ... if you will all have me.”

Erbelding and Stemmy each quickly alerted Daszak to new NIAID “funding opportunity announcements” (FOAs) to continue his research.

Stemmy emphasized the two “emergency” FOAs had “expedited review.” Respiratory Disease Branch staff “would be happy to advise you on a potential submission,” Erbelding wrote. **Though the submission period closed April 30, 2021, the [page for the emergency FOAs](#) remained live at least through mid-January this year.**

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