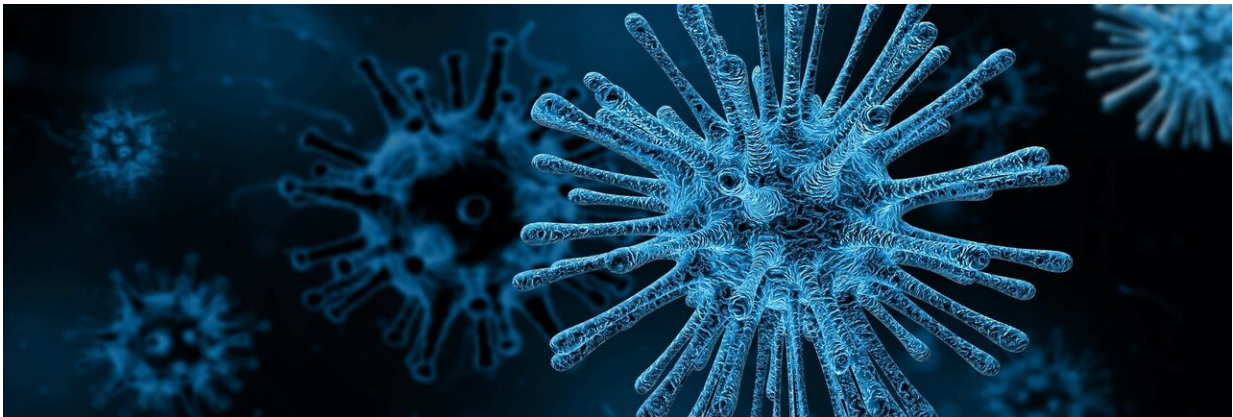


# US quietly shuts down controversial wildlife virus hunting program amid safety fears

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

For more than a decade, the US government has been funding international programs engaged in identifying exotic wildlife viruses that might someday infect humans.

But today, [\*The BMJ\*](#) can reveal that a flagship project for hunting viruses among wildlife in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America to prevent human outbreaks and pandemics is being quietly dropped by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) after private and bipartisan criticism over the safety of such research.

The shuttering of the project marks an abrupt retreat by the US

government from wildlife virus hunting, an activity that has also been funded by the Department of Defense and the National Institutes of Health, reports investigative journalist David Willman. The turnabout follows warnings raised by skeptics—including officials within the Biden White House—that the \$125 million "DEEP VZN" program could inadvertently ignite a pandemic.

The misgivings continue to resonate now, as the cause of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the world's most deadly such event in a century, remains unproven.

USAID—an arm of the US State Department—launched DEEP VZN (short for Discovery & Exploration of Emerging Pathogens—Viral Zoonoses) in October 2021, succeeding an earlier, decade-long USAID program called "PREDICT," explains Willman.

The agency promoted it as "a critical next step ... to understand and address the risks posed by zoonotic diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans" and said it would help the world "be better prepared to detect, prevent and respond to future biological threats."

But in July of this year, officials at USAID quietly informed aides to Democratic and Republican members of two Senate committees with jurisdiction over DEEP VZN that it was being shut down.

This previously unpublicized decision comes as concerns have heightened over the many risks of working with exotic viruses, including unresolved questions about whether a research mishap or a naturally occurring spillover of virus from an animal species to humans caused the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

For instance, in December 2021, two senior White House officials specializing in biosecurity and biosafety—Jason Matheny, deputy

assistant to Biden for technology and national security and Daniel Gastfriend, the National Security Council's director for biodefense and pandemic preparedness—first privately shared their views with USAID Administrator Samantha Power and advised her to shut down DEEP VZN.

Later, another White House official, T. Gregory McKelvey, Jr., a physician and the assistant director for biosecurity with the Office of Science and Technology Policy, also privately raised concerns with USAID staff.

Power eventually told Matheny and Gastfriend that she would initiate a review of the program to ensure DEEP VZN could be conducted in a way that adequately managed the risks. On Wednesday, USAID said in response to questions from *The BMJ*, that it had decided to "end the DEEP VZN" project. The decision, said USAID, reflected "the relative risks and impact of our programming."

Matheny, who left the White House in mid-2022 told *The BMJ*, "It seems likely that the agency assessed that the risks exceeded the benefits of the program."

Willman also notes that in May of this year, three leaders of the Republican-controlled House Energy and Commerce Committee asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to open a scientific audit to "assess the benefits and risks of conducting predictive field research programs for viruses."

The GAO's acting chief scientist, Karen L. Howard, estimated in an email to *The BMJ* that the audit would likely be completed during spring 2024, but declined to discuss any preliminary findings.

Meanwhile, USAID's funding of the DEEP VZN program has continued

to draw scrutiny behind the scenes from members and staff with both the Senate Foreign Relations and Senate Appropriations committees, interviews and documents show, writes Willman.

The exchanges between the Senate and USAID culminated with a brief mention of the previously unreported termination of DEEP VZN inside the State Department's fiscal year 2024 appropriation, dated July 20: "The Committee notes the decision by USAID to cease funding for the exploration of unknown pathogens."

**More information:** David Willman, The US quietly terminates a controversial \$125m wildlife virus hunting programme amid safety fears, *BMJ* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.p2002](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p2002)

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