

I could sense the outcome as soon as I pulled into the town of Butner. “No BioLab” signs dotted the roadside, the orange circle and slash now part of the local lexicon. The parking lot of the Butner-Stem Middle School was full. TV news vans, antennas erect, hugged the drop-off lane.

I was here to cover a public hearing on the proposed construction of a National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility, NBAF (pronounced “en-baff”) for short. In the wake of 9/11, the federal government realized we are extremely vulnerable to an act of bioterrorism. There are a number of diseases which, though not necessarily fatal to humans, could devastate our agricultural industry. The government’s biodefense lab at Plum Island, New York, has exceeded its lifetime and is in dire need of replacement. The mission of NBAF would be to provide a spacious and secure facility where researchers could conduct tests on large animals (pigs, cows) and develop new vaccines.

The Department of Homeland Security was charged with siting and building NBAF. They had narrowed their selection down to five possible locations: Athens, Georgia; Manhattan, Kansas; San Antonio; Texas; Flora, Mississippi; and Butner. Butner was reputed to be high on the list because of its rural setting, available land, and the support of scientists at North Carolina State University’s School of Veterinary Medicine and the NC Biotechnology Center, among others. Butner was already home to a federal prison housing some of the nation’s most dangerous inmates and a state mental hospital. Surely, the people would be willing to consider a research lab, albeit one housing dangerous viruses with no known cure.

At the entrance to the school, a tall man dressed in a mock hazmat suit fielded questions from a TV news reporter. His tone was agitated, his accent distinctly Northern. The phrase “not from around here” popped into my mind. But not from around here doesn’t mean what it used to in North Carolina.

I can remember when Granville County was as rural as anywhere in this state. If you drove through the county seat of Oxford, you were likely to end up behind a tractor hauling a wagonload of tobacco. The town had been the scene of fiery civil rights demonstrations in 1970, but had since gone back to its quiet ways. Now, ex-hippie friends who worked at Duke University and Research Triangle Park were building “intentional communities” in Granville County. I didn’t know if their ilk was behind this, but clearly the rhetoric and tools of the sixties protest movement had arrived.

Beside the hazmat guy, a group of children were singing “Glory, Glory Hallelujah” with the chorus changed to “We don’t want your dirty biolab.” Mom, who had no doubt scripted the song, waved a baton over their heads.

Inside the lobby, I was greeted by a heavysset woman wearing a black and orange T-shirt emblazoned with the letters GNAT, an acronym for Granville Non-Violent Action Team. The back of her shirt read, “Whatever It Takes.”

“Are you a reporter?” she said, eyeing my notebook and camera. “You’ll want a copy of these.”

She handed me a sheaf of flyers trumpeting the organization’s opposition to NBAF and urging people to sign an online petition. “They say if an infected mosquito were to get out of the lab, they’d have to shoot all the deer,” she told me. “Good luck with that.”

I thanked her and made my way to the gymnasium. The room was thick with GNATs, senior citizens, and a handful of suits (university admins? DC consultants?). Police officers scanned the crowd for potential troublemakers. Clustered behind the podium were the speakers from homeland security. They had the hangdog look of prisoners awaiting execution.

I read through the flyers. Some of the concerns seemed reasonable—all buildings/systems are subject to failure, researchers can intentionally or accidentally carry viruses off-site, quick evacuation of prisoners and patients from the federal correctional institute and John Umstead Hospital would be impossible. Others bordered on the absurd. Referring to the infamous Tuskegee experiment in which the U.S. Public Health Service secretly infected illiterate black sharecroppers with syphilis, one flyer stated that if NBAF were built in Butner, “the entire WORLD will reasonably suspect the US para-military and other agencies will AGAIN be tempted to use adult & underage Black captives as human guinea pigs for biological warfare research. Why else would a Biological Warfare R&D lab be built at the highest-risk site surrounded by thousands of mostly ‘non-Aryan’ prisoners and mental patients?”

A moderator called the hearing to order. She briefly described the procedure for the hearing, then introduced the NBAF program manager. A thin man with a small face took the stand. Jamie Johnson turned on his PowerPoint display and scrolled through a summary of the one-thousand-page Draft Environmental Impact Statement. He cited the potential benefits of

NBAF—new biologic knowledge, added jobs, and enhanced health and safety. Under normal operation, he said, NBAF would have “negligible” or “minor” adverse impacts on the chosen community. Should there be an accidental release, say a mosquito infected with foot-and-mouth disease, the consequences could be “significant.” Millions of animals would have to be destroyed (FMD is not transmittable to humans) and U.S. tourism, trade, and agriculture would be devastated. But, Johnson said, the chances of an accidental release were extremely low.

The moderator opened the floor to the audience. A woman approached the microphone. In trembling voice, she demanded to know how many accidental releases there’d been from the government’s Plum Island lab.

“There was one accidental release in 1978, thirty years ago,” Johnson said.

“The appendix to your report lists nine.”

“The others were cross-contaminations of animals within the facility.”

A bearded man identifying himself as a family physician questioned the trustworthiness of the Department of Homeland Security. “This facility will no doubt be run by a contractor. Who oversees the contractor? The Department of Homeland Security is a political organization. We don’t trust the Department of Homeland Security.”

The audience erupted in huzzahs.

A woman wanted to know how the pathogens would be transported to the facility.

“Agents from overseas are shipped by airline,” Johnson said. “We greet the package and transport it through customs. They are transported to the NBAF by courier vehicles monitored by GPS.”

“What happens if the plane crashes?”

The hazmat guy, headgear removed to reveal a long, gray ponytail, strode to the fore. A policeman edged toward the podium. “Your report says NBAF will employ between 300 and 350 people,” Hazmat fumed. “But Appendix D says the facility could provide space for up to 600. Just how many people are you planning to bring down here?”

Johnson looked confused.

“Have you even read your own report?”

I stopped taking notes. It wasn't that the questions were all unreasonable. But the hostility of the speakers was unsettling. No one voiced a word of support. Where, I wondered, were the scientists from NC State whom I'd heard talk of the boon this facility would be for the area? Where were the appeals to patriotism? I wondered what these speakers, many of whom said they worked for the federal prison or the hospital, would say if the government tried to locate those facilities in Butner today. Bring the most dangerous prisoners into our community? You must be insane!

But who could blame them? North Carolina's rural areas and small towns have been stuck with all sorts of enterprises—landfills, hog farms—that have made life unpleasant and ruined property values. I'd made a career out of writing articles warning people of such dangers. Now, suspicion once reserved for nuclear power plants near big cities had spread to incinerators, asphalt plants, wind farms—you name it—anywhere in the state.

A few weeks after the hearing, I called a reporter who had covered the public hearings in each of the towns selected as finalists. I wanted to know what the public reaction had been.

“The Georgia crowd had a lot of debate back and forth,” Bill said. “They were about half for and half against. The Kansas crowd was about two-to-one in favor of NBAF. Mississippi and Texas

Banana

Written by John Manuel

Tuesday, 17 February 2009 17:57 - Last Updated Tuesday, 03 March 2009 07:39

were strongly supportive. Butner was the only place that was uniformly opposed.”

“That’s amazing,” I said. “I wonder what it is about us?”

“The BANANA syndrome,” Bill said.

“Banana?”

“An extreme case of NIMBY. Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anybody.”