



PRESS RELEASE - 5 MARCH 2021

G7 GOVERNMENTS MUST ACT FAST WITH A FOCUS ON VIRAL SPILLOVER TO PREVENT THE NEXT PANDEMIC, SAYS NEW COALITION OF LEADING HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS FOCUSED ON PREVENTING PANDEMICS AT SOURCE

A new coalition of major health and environmental groups is calling on the Group of Seven (G7) governments to fill a major gap in post-COVID recovery plans. Governments are committing trillions of dollars to boost the global economy, including to strengthen public health care at home and abroad, all of which is justified, says the coalition. Missing, though, are crucial investments and actions that leading experts believe are needed if we are to prevent future pandemics. All efforts must be taken to prevent pathogen spillover from animals and outbreaks in the first place. “The COVID-19 vaccines will help rescue us from this current mess, but it won’t do a thing to protect us from the next pandemic. Only with actions that stop emerging infections where they start can we end our ill-fated game of Russian roulette with pathogens,” stressed coalition member Dr. Aaron Bernstein of Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Boston Children’s Hospital.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 most likely jumped from wild bats to humans, possibly via other wildlife species - an event known as “spillover”. The science is clear that about two-thirds of human illnesses start in other species and make the leap to humans. Known as zoonotic diseases, these include the flu, HIV-AIDS, and the common cold.

There are more than 1.6 million undiscovered viruses circulating in wildlife, about a third of them likely to have the ability, like SARS-CoV-2, to infect other animals and people. The frequency of spillovers from animals to humans has increased greatly in recent decades because of human activity that brings us and our domestic animals into closer and more frequent contact with wildlife. COVID-19 was not unexpected, and nor will be the next pandemic if we don’t make serious changes to the way we do things globally.

Dr. Jon Epstein, Vice President for Science and Outreach with EcoHealth Alliance, who has been studying zoonotic viruses and disease emergence for decades, noted, “We have a good understanding of why more spillovers are happening and how they can be prevented. Relatively modest spending - a fraction of the cost of responding to pandemics like COVID-19 - and cooperation between governments in emerging disease hotspots to combat deforestation, significantly reduce commercial wildlife trade and improve biosecurity around livestock production systems would significantly help to prevent the next pandemic.”

Harvard and EcoHealth Alliance are members of the coalition calling for greater attention to spillover prevention together with Conservation International, Dalberg Catalyst, Health In Harmony, PIVOT, Right to Health Action, Rainforest Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, World Resources Institute and World Wildlife Fund. The effort was initiated by Dalberg Catalyst, a new US-based nonprofit that builds silo-breaking efforts to help address some of the world’s most pressing problems. Sonila Cook, founding CEO, says, “It’s

inspiring how quickly this coalition that bridges the worlds of public health and conservation has united behind a common message: that we can and must do everything possible to prevent the next pandemic while we continue to address COVID-19.”

Global spending to date on the COVID-19 response likely exceeds \$20 trillion. A peer-reviewed study by Dr. Bernstein and colleagues shows that annual global spending of about \$10-20 billion would be sufficient to implement most spillover prevention actions, and to prevent future pandemics and associated economic devastation. These actions include working more closely with countries in tropical regions such as the Amazon, Central and West Africa, and Southeast Asia to reduce clearing of tropical forests; greatly reducing the wildlife trade and associated markets, which includes both legal and illegal elements; and improving animal husbandry practices globally.

Taken together, such steps would reduce spillover events by diminishing the risky contact humans have with other species that harbor new pathogens to which we have no resistance, in deforestation hotspots, wildlife markets, and animal husbandry. Dr. Thomas Lovejoy, an advisor to the coalition, and one of the world’s foremost tropical forest ecologists who began his career studying wild viruses in birds in the Brazilian Amazon, highlighted, “Preventing the next spillover event is yet another incredibly important reason to ramp up efforts to protect forests globally, especially in tropical regions that harbor most of the species of animals and plants, as well as viruses, found on Earth. This goes hand in hand with similar efforts needed to conserve biodiversity and reverse catastrophic climate change.”

“As the new Biden Administration ramps up leadership on pandemic recovery in the US and internationally, and the UK prepares to host the next G7 summit in mid-2021, now is the perfect time for global leadership and concrete action to protect people and the planet from the devastating impacts of deforestation, destructive wildlife trade and unsafe agricultural practices,” said Melinda Kimble, an advisor to the coalition, formerly a top US State Department official, who now works with the UN Foundation.

“We can prevent the next pandemic,” concluded the Rainforest Alliance’s Dr. Nigel Sizer who has worked for three decades to protect tropical forests. “The compelling need for pandemic prevention can help all governments to take the tough political decisions needed to reduce forest loss, combat wildlife trafficking, close down unsafe wet markets and ensure safe animal husbandry.”

Additional statements from coalition members:

“This sober anniversary is a reminder that we must do all we can urgently, to fix our broken relationship with nature if we want to reduce the risks of future pandemics. We are only at the beginning of an era of zoonotic disease emergence that has the potential to continually undermine global public health and shut down global economies. It’s imperative we build more sustainable societies. It starts with securing our forests: the front line of defense against many new zoonotic diseases. How we manage land is a primary driver of pandemic risk. Environmental incursions, including agriculture and infrastructure development, have a huge impact on public health. G7 leaders should embrace economic policy and economic incentives for protecting the planet and investing in development that benefits both people and nature.” - **Nik Sekhran, World Wildlife Fund**

"The evidence shows that ecological degradation increases the overall risk of zoonotic disease outbreaks originating from wildlife. The key "ingredients" that accentuate the risk of an emerging infectious disease spillover event are activities (e.g., land conversion, creation of new habitat edges, wildlife trade and consumption, agricultural intensification) in or linked to areas of high biodiversity that elevate contact rates between humans, livestock, and certain wildlife species. Once we are alert to this risk there is a whole range of measures we can take to minimize it, measures which will also help us to address the climate and biodiversity crises." - **Dr. Tom Evans, Wildlife Conservation Society**

"The science is clear that pandemics of zoonotic origin such as COVID-19 are directly related to the increase in the human/wildlife interface caused by destruction of intact ecosystems, deforestation and forest degradation, and commercial wildlife exploitation (particularly for human consumption). Combatting the biodiversity, health, and climate crises is not a zero-sum game, and governments must take urgent integrated action on all three fronts to prevent the next global pandemic. We owe it to future generations to go beyond business as usual, and prevent the spillover and outbreaks in the first place" - **Dr. Susan Lieberman, Wildlife Conservation Society**

"While some of the links on zoonotic-origin pathogen emergence and spread are still fuzzy, we know enough to adamantly state: if we don't act on what we have already learned, the costs to human health and wellbeing from pandemics such as COVID-19 will just keep on escalating." - **Dr. Chris Walzer, Wildlife Conservation Society**

"Affordable, proven solutions that more than pay for themselves exist today to prevent future pandemics, and they're right under our nose. Indigenous peoples and local rainforest communities – guardians of the majority of Earth's carbon-rich and biodiverse ecosystems – possess wisdom stemming from generational interdependence on nature for their subsistence, livelihoods, and health. [Models like this one](#) invest in their expertise and can be replicated quickly in spillover hotspots around the world to stop forest loss and prevent zoonotic outbreaks. These investments more than pay for themselves in the form of carbon sequestration redeemable on emerging carbon markets." - **Jonathan Jennings, Health In Harmony**

"Right to Health Action is the largest grassroots movement in the United States working to stop COVID-19, representing scholars, global and domestic health activists and families who have lost someone to the current outbreak. We are strongly supportive of new action to 'build back better' and prevent the imminent pandemics of the future. Our coalition's plan to prevent pandemics at the source is a cost-effective strategy to avert future losses of millions of lives and save trillions of unnecessary expenses. Right to Health Action stands with the coalition to protect the human rights of indigenous communities, stop deforestation and wildlife trade that puts the world at risk, and take decisive action to stop future outbreaks. On behalf of the millions worldwide who have lost loved ones, we urge the Biden Administration and Congress to include \$2.5 billion in seed funding for new multilateral action to make sure this nightmare never happens again." - **Paul Davis, Policy Director, R2H Action [Right to Health]**