

United States Senate

October 2, 2024

Robert Clarke, PhD, DSc
Executive Director, Hormel Institute
University of Minnesota
801 16th Ave. NE
Austin, MN 55912

Dear Director Clarke,

I write to you today with growing concern regarding the Hormel Institute's longstanding partnership with China's Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV).

The WIV, as you are certainly aware, has been credibly implicated as the likely point of origin of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Even more troubling are its direct ties to China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its involvement in classified military research including laboratory animal experiments under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at least as recently as 2017.² Despite these alarming connections which raise obvious national security concerns, the institute you lead has not only maintained its collaboration with WIV but it has done so with the backing of Minnesota's top elected official.³

For over a decade, Governor Tim Walz has acted as one of the Institute's most ardent supporters, securing millions of taxpayer dollars to fund its operations, including over \$2 million in federal funding for technology acquisitions and a \$5 million earmark to expand your Institute's reach.⁴ The Governor's support for the Hormel Institute has remained steadfast, continuing even after the FBI concluded on February 28, 2023 that COVID-19 pandemic likely originated from the WIV.⁵

In recent years, researchers at the Hormel Institute have collaborated with the Wuhan Institute of Virology on a variety of projects, including a 2020 COVID-19 study and, as more recently as of 2024, on structural biology research.⁶

The COVID-19 study, titled "A dynamic regulatory interface on SARS-CoV-2 RNA polymerase," was authored by four WIV researchers, three Hormel Institute researchers, and a Yale School of Medicine professor.⁷ Similarly, in January 2024, Hormel Institute researchers published a study

¹ Anumita Kaur, Dan Diamond, *FBI director says covid-19 'most likely' originated from lab incident*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Feb. 28, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/02/28/fbi-director-christopher-wray-wuhan-lab/>.

² Gabe Kaminsky, *Tim Walz promoted research facility that partners with China's Wuhan lab*, WASHINGTON EXAMINER (Sept. 6, 2024), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/campaigns/presidential/3144141/tim-walz-research-facility-china-wuhan-lab/>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

on genes with the WIV’s Lina He, Wei Zhou, and Yangbo Hu.⁸ In 2023, WIV’s Yangbo Hu also worked with the Hormel Institute’s Dmytro Kompaniets, Dong Wang, and Bin Liu on research titled “Structure and molecular mechanism of bacterial transcription activation,” among other collaborations.⁹

Furthermore, the resignation of your predecessor, Dr. Zigang Dong, who served as Executive Director for nearly 18 years and resigned following an FBI investigation into his “possible failure to disclose foreign backing when applying for grants,” should have prompted a thorough reassessment of your institute’s engagements with foreign entities.¹⁰ Yet, despite this disconcerting event, Governor Walz continues to promote and direct public resources to your institute.¹¹ Even after the U.S. government ceased funding to organizations working with the WIV, Governor Walz toured your facility and publicly praised its work.¹²

Governor Walz’s personal connections to China—his honeymoon there, over 30 trips, and public comments downplaying the strategic threat posed by the CCP¹³—only raise further questions about his motivations for promoting your institution.

Additionally, in 2020, the Hormel Institute’s disclosure in a 2020 EMBO Journal Study that it received “help from the Core Facility and Technical Support” of the WIV for “radioactive and fluorescent tests” adds to the concern.¹⁴ Further raising suspicions is that Bin Liu, a professor at the Hormel Institute who worked on that 2020 EMBO Journal study, attended Wuhan University.¹⁵ Federal records indicate that the researchers for this particular study included those affiliated with the WIV, in addition to the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences and China’s Zhengzhou University.¹⁶

In light of these recently-disclosed facts, it is critical to understand the full extent of your institute’s involvement in a partnership that risks benefitting our nation’s chief geopolitical adversary. Accordingly, for the purposes of oversight, I request that you respond to the following questions and requests by October 31, 2024:

1. How much public and private funding has the Hormel Institute received specifically for projects involving collaboration with the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV)? Please provide an itemized accounting of all such funding.
2. When did the Hormel Institute first initiate collaboration with the WIV, and what were the specific reasons for choosing to partner with a facility known to have ties to China’s People’s Liberation Army?

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

3. What actions has the Hormel Institute taken to ensure that its collaborative work with the WIV does not benefit China's military or pose a risk to U.S. national security?
 - a. If no such actions were taken, what was the rationale behind this decision?
4. Given the WIV's ties to China's military, why has the Hormel Institute not publicly disclosed the full extent of its collaborations with the WIV?
 - a. If this information has been withheld, please explain why.
5. Please provide all internal documentation or communications related to the Hormel Institute's partnerships with Chinese research facilities, including but not limited to the WIV.
6. What was the Institute's reasoning behind continuing its collaboration with the WIV, even after serious concerns about the origins of COVID-19 and the lab's military affiliations became widely known?
7. How can the American public trust that the Hormel Institute's partnerships with the WIV are not inadvertently advancing China's geopolitical goals, particularly in biotechnology and biomedical research?
8. Given the U.S. government's cessation of funding to other nonprofits with ties to the WIV, what justifications does the Hormel Institute offer for continuing its relationship with the WIV?
9. Why did the Hormel Institute continue collaborating with the WIV after your predecessor, Dr. Zigang Dong, resigned amid an FBI investigation into his failure to disclose foreign funding when applying for grants?
10. The Hormel Institute's work with the WIV includes research on gene structures and SARS-CoV-2 RNA polymerase. What measures have been taken to ensure that no sensitive intellectual property or technology has been transferred to China's military-backed labs during these studies? If no measures were taken, why not?
11. Please provide any documentation or communications between the Hormel Institute and the Office of the Minnesota Governor regarding the Institute's partnerships with Chinese research facilities, particularly the WIV.

Your institute's ongoing partnership with the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and by extension the People's Liberation Army, reflects a troubling disregard for national security concerns. The devastating impact of COVID-19 has highlighted the seriousness of these issues, as the pandemic has severely affected lives and economies worldwide. The American people deserve assurance that their resources and institutions are not inadvertently supporting the goals of our chief geopolitical adversary. As Executive Director, it is crucial that you address these concerns

transparently. Failure to do so will only deepen public mistrust and undermine confidence in your institute's integrity and intentions.

The American people look forward to your timely and comprehensive response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ted Cruz', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ted Cruz
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on the Constitution
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary