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## HHS Names UTMB, Seven Others as New Regional Centers To Focus on Biodefense Research

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) today announced that the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston (UTMB) is among eight institutions nationwide receiving grants totaling approximately \$350 million over five years to establish Regional Centers of Excellence for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Diseases Research (RCE). The grant will be administered by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), one of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This nationwide group of multidisciplinary centers is a key element in the federal strategic plan for biodefense research.

The grant from HHS to UTMB is approximately \$48 million over five years.

UTMB's proposal includes projects from a number of institutions and entities from Region VI, which includes Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arkansas and Louisiana. Scientists participating in this RCE will work on developing vaccines against Rift Valley fever, smallpox, Venezuelan eastern equine encephalitis; Venezuelan western equine encephalitis; brucellosis, tularemia and typhus; on discovering new drugs against anthrax, filoviruses, alphaviruses, flaviviruses and poxviruses; and on finding advanced methods to diagnose Q fever and typhus.

In addition to UTMB, institutions playing major roles in the Region VI RCE include the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas; the University of Texas Health Science Centers at Houston and at San Antonio; the University of Texas at El Paso and at San Antonio; Texas A&M University; Rice University; the University of Houston; the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research in San Antonio; Oklahoma University; Louisiana State University Health Science Center at Shreveport; Tulane Research Primate Resource Center; the University of Arkansas; the University of New Mexico; and MacroGenics Inc., with laboratories in Dallas.

"This RCE designation represents a remarkable alliance of 16 entities in a five-state region coming together to do important work for the safety of the nation," said UTMB President John D. Stobo. "UTMB is honored to lead this coalition."

Said Professor David H. Walker, chair of UTMB's Department of Pathology and director of its Center for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Diseases, "The federal decision to fund an RCE based at UTMB provides a great opportunity for us and collaborating institutions to develop tools to diagnose, treat and prevent illnesses that have been serious scourges in their own right and now threaten the world as possible weapons in the hands of bioterrorists." Although traditionally many of the institutions playing major roles in the UTMB-led consortium have been competitors, Walker said that they have shown "a remarkably collegial spirit" in this effort and are "truly collaborating in the national interest."

Nationally, according to NIAID, the primary role of the RCE program is to foster the physical and intellectual environments in which wide-ranging research on infectious diseases can proceed productively and safely.

All RCEs will:

- Support investigator-directed research
- Train researchers and other personnel for biodefense research activities
- Create and maintain supporting resources, including scientific equipment; and trained support personnel, for use by the RCEs and other researchers in the region
- Emphasize research focused on development and testing of vaccine; therapeutic and diagnostic concepts
- Make available core facilities to approved investigators from academia, government, biotech companies and the pharmaceutical industry
- Provide facilities and scientific support to first responders in the event of a national biodefense emergency

Other institutions also designated as RCEs include Duke University; Harvard Medical School; New York State Department of Health; University of Chicago; University of Maryland; University of Washington; and Washington University in St. Louis.

Additional information on NIAID's biodefense program is available at <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/biodefense/>.

UTMB, opened in 1891 as Texas' first medical school, has grown to become a major academic health center with four schools, more than 2,000 students, six hospitals, and a diverse work force of health professionals and scientists among its approximately 13,000 employees. It is one of six health components of the University of Texas System.

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For further information from NIAID, contact its Office of Communication at (301) 402-1663.

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