SUBJECT: Establishment of the Tick-Borne Diseases Advisory Committee

BACKGROUND: Lyme disease, usually contracted by a bite from an infected tick, is the most common vector-borne disease in the United States. The problem that exists today, however, is that ticks carry much more than just Lyme disease. There are many diseases (e.g., babesiosis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Southern Tick Associated Rash Illness (STARI), ehrlichiosis, anaplasmosis, Tularemia, and bartonellosis), some life-threatening, carried by ticks that can complicate the diagnosis, treatment, and a patient’s ability to recover once he or she has been exposed.

In humans, infection with Lyme disease bacteria alone can lead to early symptoms, such as severe headaches, debilitating fatigue, joint pain, and skin rashes. Long-term symptoms can lead to problems related to the central nervous system, including the brain, as well as to the heart, joints, and other musculoskeletal problems. Symptoms of Lyme disease vary for each individual patient and also vary in intensity over the course of the disease.

The Lyme disease bacterium has the ability to enter the brain less than 24 hours after a tick bite. Lyme disease is called the “great imitator” because it can mimic MS, ALS, fibromyalgia, lupus, chronic fatigue, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, and even autism. On average, patients with chronic Lyme disease had symptoms for 1.2 years before being correctly diagnosed. Children, ages 5–14, are at the highest risk of acquiring this horrible disease.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), reports of Lyme disease are growing at an alarming rate. The CDC also reports that Lyme disease is still vastly underreported, with only 10 percent of cases that meet its surveillance criteria being recorded. That translates into more than a quarter of a million new cases of Lyme disease each year.

The long-term cost of Lyme disease is astounding. Mothers and fathers are losing their jobs and their homes and many seek disability because they cannot get treatment. The federal government is footing the bill for many of the chronic cases that slip through the current system and the numbers continue to grow. In addition, the medical resources available to help our family members, friends, and neighbors with Lyme disease are far from adequate. Treating doctors think tests miss 50 percent or more of patients. Research funding, as provided in this H.R. 610/S 719) could lead to the development of more accurate tests.

H.R. 610 and S.719 would also establish an Advisory Committee that would provide communication among federal agencies and private organizations, advise agencies on priorities concerning tick-borne diseases, minimize the overlap of activities, ensure that a broad spectrum of scientific viewpoints is represented in public health policies, and advise Health & Human Services about ongoing activities and what needs to be accomplished. Federal legislation is important because it will open the door for more opinions and unbiased research to get to the real answers.