

After Grilling an NIH Scientist Over COVID Emails, Congress Turns to Anthony Fauci

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Former National Institutes of Health official Anthony Fauci has faced many hostile questions from members of Congress, but when he appears before a House panel on Monday, he'll have something new to answer for: a trove of [incendiary emails](#) written by one of his closest advisers.

In the emails, David Morens, a career federal scientist now on administrative leave, described deleting messages and using a personal email account to evade disclosure of correspondence under the Freedom of Information Act.

"i learned from our foia lady here how to make emails disappear after i am foia'd but before the search starts, so i think we are all safe," Morens wrote in a February 24, 2021, email. "Plus i deleted most of those earlier emails after sending them to gmail."

The pressure is on as Fauci himself prepares to appear June 3 before a House subcommittee exploring the origins of COVID-19. The NIH, a \$49 billion agency that is the foremost source of funding in the world for biomedical research, finds itself under unusual bipartisan scrutiny. The subcommittee has demanded more outside oversight of NIH and its 50,000 grants and raised the idea of term limits for officials like Fauci, who led the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, an NIH component, from 1984 to 2022.

Lawmakers are likely to put Fauci on the spot about Morens' emails at a time when Republicans are questioning NIH's credibility and integrity. Even Democrats have cautioned the agency's leaders.

"When people don't trust scientists, they don't trust the science," Rep. Deborah Ross (D-N.C.) told Morens.

The subcommittee has yet to turn up evidence implicating the NIH or U.S. scientists in the pandemic's beginnings in Wuhan, China. Nor has its work shed light on the origin of the virus.

But in [a May 28 letter to NIH Director Monica Bertagnolli](#), the subcommittee's chairman, Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R-Ohio), said the evidence "suggests a conspiracy at the highest levels of NIH and NIAID to avoid public transparency regarding the COVID-19 pandemic."

Rep. Jill Tokuda, a subcommittee Democrat from Hawaii, said the evidence shows no such conspiracy. She predicted the bipartisan criticism of Morens, 76, will give way to "a clash of intentions" at the hearing as Republicans try to pin COVID on Fauci.

"For them, I think this is their moment to, again, bring a lot of these baseless, false allegations to the front," Tokuda said.

On May 29, Wenstrup asked Fauci to turn over personal e-mails ahead of his testimony.

Here are things to know as the subcommittee gears up for Fauci's appearance.

What Is the Subcommittee Looking For?

The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic is supposed to be investigating how the pandemic started and the federal government's response. That includes such hot-button issues as vaccination policies and school closures.

A central question is whether the COVID virus leaped from animals to humans at a market in Wuhan, China, or spread from a leak at the nearby Wuhan Institute of Virology. The Wuhan lab received funding from an NIH grant recipient called EcoHealth Alliance.

The congressional probe is in some ways an extension of the nation's political, cultural, and scientific battles arising from the pandemic.

The Republican-led subcommittee has been examining NIH's performance and that of Fauci, who advised both former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden, becoming the face of many of the government's most polarizing pandemic policies.

The panel called for the government to [cut off EcoHealth's funding](#), a process the Department of Health and Human Services [recently initiated](#).

EcoHealth's president, Peter Daszak, was Morens' friend and the recipient of many of the emails under scrutiny. A wildlife biologist credited with helping to develop the first COVID antiviral drug, remdesivir, Daszak said he and his organization did nothing wrong.

"We were so accurate in our predictions that a bat coronavirus would emerge from China and cause a pandemic, that when it did, we're dragged in front of the crowd with their pitchforks and blamed for it," Daszak said in an interview.

What's at Stake for NIH?

The Republican-led subcommittee is challenging NIH's credibility. The agency performs and funds a wide variety of medical and scientific research, work that is often the foundation of new

medicines and other treatments, and has long enjoyed bipartisan support from Congress. The agency is home to the "[Cancer Moonshot](#)," a Biden priority.

As head of NIAID and a presidential adviser, Fauci helped guide the public during the pandemic on measures to avoid infection, such as mask-wearing and maintaining physical distance.

But at a May 22 hearing, Wenstrup said Fauci's NIAID "was, unfortunately, less pristine than so many, including the media, would have had us all believe."

In his letter to Bertagnolli, Wenstrup said there was evidence that a former chief of staff of Fauci's might have used intentional misspellings — such as a variant of "EcoHealth" — to prevent emails from being captured in keyword searches by FOIA officials.

Wenstrup's office did not respond to questions or an interview request.

An aide to the top Democrat on the subcommittee, Rep. Raul Ruiz of California, said he was unavailable for an interview.

Why Were Morens' Emails Alarming?

The emails show a pattern of trying to shield communications from public disclosure.

"We are all smart enough to know to never have smoking guns, and if we did we wouldn't put them in emails, and if we found them we'd delete them," Morens wrote on June 16, 2020.

"The best way to avoid FOIA hassles is to delete all emails when you learn a subject is getting sensitive," he wrote on June 28, 2021.

Some of Morens' emails included sexual or sexist remarks, including one from December 2020: "Beverage is always good, and best delivered by a blonde nymphomaniac." In [another email](#), discussing how former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky got her job, he remarked, "Well, she does wear a skirt."

Morens apologized at the May 22 hearing and called some of what he wrote "misogynistic."

"Some of the emails I've seen that you all have provided look pretty incriminating," he testified.

Asked if he ever sent information related to COVID to Fauci's personal email, he said he didn't remember but might have.

Morens said some of his comments were "snarky jokes" intended to cheer up his friend Daszak, the EcoHealth president, who was receiving death threats over media coverage of his organization's relationship with the Wuhan lab.

Morens testified that he didn't knowingly delete official records.

Ross, the North Carolina representative, said the emails “inflict serious damage on public trust for the entire scientific enterprise.” She said the dangers can be seen in eroding public confidence in vaccines, contributing to recent outbreaks of measles.

Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-Mich.) said Morens showed disdain for the Freedom of Information Act. The subcommittee’s investigation has been an unfounded effort to pin the blame for the pandemic on NIH and NIAID, and Morens’ emails have helped blur the issues, she said.

Do the Emails Reveal the Origins of COVID?

No, as Democrats have emphasized.

In a way, Morens’ correspondence undercuts allegations that people at the top of NIAID covered up a lab leak in Wuhan.

None of Morens’ emails describe any effort to suppress evidence of a lab leak and, in an email sent from a private account, he ridiculed the idea, calling it “false to the point of being crazy.” But the subcommittee’s senior Democrat, Ruiz, criticized Morens for dismissing the lab leak theory.

“Unless and until we see specific evidence on the origins” of the virus that causes COVID, “the scientific process requires that we examine all possible hypotheses with objectivity,” Ruiz said.

KFF Health News senior correspondent Arthur Allen contributed to this report.

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