



September 30, 2025

The Honorable Jay Bhattacharya
Director, National Institutes of Health

Via e-mail: Jayanta.Bhattacharya@nih.hhs.gov; NIHExecSec@nih.gov

Re: NSAB Findings, Leadership Failures, and the Future of WaNPRC

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

I'm writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)—PETA entities have more than 10 million members and supporters globally—to share the findings of NIH-mandated external advisors that make one conclusion unavoidable: the Washington National Primate Research Center (WaNPRC) is collapsing and should not receive further federal funding for primate experimentation.

Every National Primate Research Center (NPRC) receiving a P51 base grant from NIH is required to maintain a National Scientific Advisory Board (NSAB). These boards, composed of independent senior scientists, provide external evaluations of each NPRC's performance. While NIH has not clarified how it incorporates these reports into its funding decisions, the fact that they are a condition of the P51 award underscores their importance. At a minimum, the evaluations produced by these independent experts should help NIH assess whether the NPRCs it supports are financially sound, scientifically credible, and meeting their basic obligations.

PETA recently obtained both the 2022 and 2024 NSAB reports for WaNPRC through a public records request to the University of Washington. Together, they show how the primate center was described in 2022 as scientifically strong and manageable, but by 2024 was deemed 'chaotic,' financially unsustainable, and on a path that would 'ultimately cease to function.'

This raises a critical question: are these NIH-mandated evaluations actually reaching NIH and being used to guide oversight and funding decisions? Our concern deepened with NIH's September 2025 response to a FOIA request we submitted in 2021. NIH confirmed that it had "no records" of NSAB reports for the Wisconsin NPRC dating back to 2016. If NIH does not consistently receive these evaluations, it risks missing the red flags now evident in WaNPRC's own NSAB reports.

The 2022 and 2024 NSAB reports chart WaNPRC's collapse with unusual clarity. They show an institution that has gone from cautiously optimistic external reviews to blunt warnings of imminent failure—and they raise serious questions about the leadership decisions that steered the primate center into this trajectory. These are the findings of external scientists—peers appointed to serve on the NIH-mandated National Scientific Advisory Board—and they echo the

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concerns I raised in my two recent letters, [September 11](#) and [September 19](#), to the University of Washington Board of Regents and President.

Those letters documented WaNPRC's Arizona Breeding Colony's financial unsustainability, chronic understaffing, deteriorating infrastructure, and possible soil contamination; the Center's legacy deficits and attempts to offload monkeys to other institutions; the collapse of the federally funded H1N1 pregnancy study under Associate Director Adams Waldorf, and UW's IACUC treating nearly two years of injections with the wrong virus in that infectious-disease study as a discussion item rather than a sentinel event; repeated detections of notifiable pathogens in the Seattle colony adjacent to UW Hospital; and escalating in-fighting among senior leadership, including Sally Thompson-Iritani and Michele Basso trading blame, with subsequent admissions by Deborah Fuller about being unprepared for the Director role she was pushed into. The alignment between what WaNPRC's external scientific advisors reported and what UW's own records now confirm should leave no doubt about the Center's trajectory.

The [2022 NSAB](#) report struck an optimistic tone, presenting WaNPRC as scientifically strong, with new leadership and manageable problems. Even Valley Fever, deficits, and staffing shortages were portrayed as opportunities for growth. But at this moment of apparent promise, Sally Thompson-Iritani—already elevated into UW's research administration—had recently installed Michele Basso as director in late 2021. When the NSAB convened in May 2022, Basso had only been in the role for a few months, so the committee could not yet have seen her failings firsthand. However, UW leadership knew her well-documented record, and Thompson-Iritani's decision to bring her in despite that history set the stage for the unraveling that soon followed.

By contrast, the [2024 NSAB](#) report represents a devastating reversal. The tone shifted from encouragement to alarm, with the Board describing WaNPRC as financially unstable, administratively chaotic, scientifically endangered, and on a path to outright collapse. Their written conclusion was blunt: *“Unless corrected, these issues could undermine the science, the funding base, and the operation of the Primate Center... the NPRC will ultimately cease to function, with profound negative consequences for the Center, its scientific mission, and the University as a whole.”*

The 2024 NSAB identified several core failures:

- **Financial dysfunction:** Fiscal operations were in “disarray,” with delayed invoices, incorrect and inconsistent contract pricing, and repayments of hundreds of thousands of dollars already made to NIH. These errors not only undercut credibility but also jeopardize WaNPRC's ability to maintain outside collaborations.
- **Administrative chaos:** The NSAB repeatedly used the term “chaotic” to describe WaNPRC's administrative structure. For an R1 university that prides itself on research excellence, having an NIH-mandated panel of external scientists describe its federally funded primate center as “chaotic” is a damning indictment. And while the NSAB applied the term to administration, at a research university, administrative collapse cannot be separated from scientific collapse: billing errors, staffing instability, and disorganized oversight directly undermine the quality, compliance, and credibility of the science itself.
- **Strained partnerships:** Collaborations with Fred Hutch were described as uncoordinated and at risk of collapse, threatening NIH-funded gene therapy projects.

- **Staffing instability:** The NSAB highlighted extreme personnel instability, noting that while the husbandry unit was technically “fully staffed,” there was a 50% annual turnover rate among lower-level husbandry staff. This constant churn leaves WaNPRC unable to maintain a consistent, experienced workforce for the basic care of monkeys, and was compounded by the loss of core scientists critical to sustaining research programs.
- **Animal colony failures:** The Arizona colony remained plagued by endemic Valley Fever, with no isolation facilities for diseased animals and persistent staffing shortages, conditions that fundamentally compromised its stability.
- **Breakdown in basic veterinary and scientific practice:** The NSAB reported that “*not all of the animals that die or are euthanized receive a necropsy. All breeding animals are necropsied but not all study animals. At a minimum, a gross necropsy should be performed on all NHPs.*” They also noted that “*many personnel, including the veterinary pathologists, are teleworking from home*” and warned of an impending pathology coverage gap due to the lead pathologist's retirement. In addition, the Center was relying heavily on UW's human hospital clinical laboratory for animal diagnostic testing—an arrangement that may be inexpensive, but leaves WaNPRC without robust, dedicated capacity for veterinary diagnostics.

The NSAB's findings on the failure to conduct necropsies on all study animals and on pathologists working from home rather than on site, along with WaNPRC's reliance on UW's human hospital clinical laboratory, take on even greater significance considering what their 2024 report does *not* mention. As I documented in my September 19 letter, monkeys at the WaNPRC were repeatedly found carrying notifiable pathogens — including *Campylobacter*, *Shigella*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*, and Valley Fever — while housed in the very same complex as UW Hospital. And because WaNPRC depends on the hospital's clinical laboratory for diagnostic testing, biological samples from these monkeys are entering the same patient-facing systems used for human care. This is not just an administrative problem or a research-quality concern — it is a biosecurity lapse with direct implications for the wider UW community.

WaNPRC's current five-year P51 award runs only through April 2027, leaving no realistic scenario in which the Center can stabilize before its renewal is submitted for NIH review and decision. The NSAB's findings point to only one conclusion: planning must begin now for an orderly wind-down of the WaNPRC and for the long-term care of the monkeys. Anything less would disregard the judgment of NIH's own external scientific advisors and risk prolonging a crisis that is already well-documented. I urge NIH to begin that planning process immediately and require NSAB reports from every NPRC before issuing further funding.

Sincerely,



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