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EDITORIAL

Bureaucrats and the Cloven-Hoofed

As if there's not enough on its smorgasbord of potential threats, the Department of Homeland Security is studying whether the government's contagious animal disease lab can be moved to mainland farm country from its longtime island outpost off the coast of New York. Members of Congress are properly alarmed at the news that the agency is already considering five possible sites onshore, even though there have been no risk assessments yet on potential relocation dangers to the livestock industry from foot-and-mouth disease and other contagious threats.

There's good reason why the lab has been situated on Plum Island, a few miles northeast of Long Island, where prevailing winds blow out to sea. The lab has been the nation's sole research bulwark against the invasion of foreign animal diseases, and no animal pathogen has escaped ashore in nearly a half-century of research. It's been seven decades since the nation suffered its last devastating bout of foot-and-mouth disease, which spares humans but strikes cows, pigs, sheep and other cloven-hoofed animals. An outbreak eight years ago in Britain caused an estimated \$15 billion in losses.

Homeland Security Department and agriculture officials have concluded that Plum Island is too small and outdated to meet a presidential mandate to modernize. Fortunately, lawmakers are dubious about agency assurances that modern technology can make the study of animal diseases safe in the midst of livestock country being considered in Georgia, Mississippi, Kansas, North Carolina and Texas. "History is littered with the smoking wreckage of the impregnable, the indestructible and the unsinkable," said Representative John Dingell in noting the homeland agency has been too secretive and arrogant for its own good.

Chastised officials responded with promises of thorough risk assessments before pursuing the idea further. And, yes, they sensibly are adding a sixth and most obvious alternative at lawmakers' suggestion — to modernize the Plum Island lab and spare the mainland a fresh dose of unnecessary anxiety.