March 23, 2013

In keeping with our pledge to maintain transparency in matters related to the Galveston National Laboratory, I want to share with you the following information that will be distributed to local media and our Community Liaison Committee today.

During a routine internal inspection conducted on March 20 and 21, 2013, UTMB could not account for one vial of a select agent. The vial, containing less than a quarter of a teaspoon of material, had been stored in a locked freezer within a secure laboratory designed and approved to handle this kind of biological material safely (Biosafety Level 4).

The virus in the vial is called Guanarito; it is not known to be transmitted from person-to-person and therefore poses no appreciable public health risk. It is native only to Venezuela and can cause hemorrhagic fever. In the limited area of Venezuela where the virus is found, it is transmitted only by rodents native to the area and is not believed to be capable of surviving naturally in rodents in the United States.

This is the first time that any vial containing a select agent has been unaccounted for at UTMB. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was notified immediately, and UTMB simultaneously began a rigorous process to ensure the safety of its researchers, employees and the community. UTMB has confirmed that there was no breach in the facility’s security and there is no indication that any wrongdoing is involved. The investigation continues, but at this time, it is likely, but not confirmed, that the vial was destroyed during normal laboratory sterilization practices. As per our normal procedures, we have also notified our Community Liaison Committee, which serves as an independent communication and oversight group for UTMB’s high-containment research programs.

Thank you.

Dr. David L. Callender
President