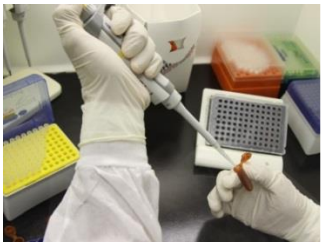
Homeland Security

Office of Health Affairs
BioWatch



BioWatch, a presidential initiative, is a system designed to detect the presence of biological agents that have been intentionally released into the air.

The BioWatch Program

This early warning system may allow for life-saving treatment to begin in a timely manner. BioWatch is a cornerstone in the Department of Homeland Security's comprehensive strategy for countering terrorism.

BioWatch monitors the air for biological agents likely to be used in a bioterrorism attack. If a detection occurs, public health and other local and state officials use the information to coordinate emergency response, including prompt medical care and other actions to protect public health and safety. This combination of early warning and rapid response may potentially reduce illness and death from a bioterrorism attack.

BioWatch jurisdictions and federal agencies work together to ensure the overall resilience of the program. Effective working relationships between federal, state, and local public health, laboratories, law enforcement, and environmental health agencies are key to BioWatch's success.

BioWatch Operations

- BioWatch operates a network of air-monitoring collectors at multiple locations within a jurisdiction. BioWatch laboratories process and analyze filter samples to determine the presence of select biological agents. BioWatch operations are held to rigorous quality standards to ensure confidence in laboratory results.
- If the BioWatch laboratory determines the presence of a biological agent on a filter, federal and jurisdictional notifications are activated.
- Before air monitoring begins in a BioWatch jurisdiction, state and local officials develop clear and detailed plans to respond to a biological agent detection.

Quick Facts

- There are more than **30 BioWatch jurisdictions** across the United States. These areas may be composed of one or more cities, counties, or states.
- The air-monitoring collectors draw air through filters for **24 hours, 365 days a year.**
- BioWatch has operated successfully since **April 2003** and is currently managed by the Office of Health Affairs.
- Jurisdictional readiness is among the **program's best practices** for a timely and efficient response following a detection.

Accomplishments

- **Partners in preparedness.** Partnerships developed through participation in BioWatch have created a nationwide network of relationships that will prove critical in the event of an act of bioterrorism. BioWatch operational integration into other emergency planning activities strengthens all hazards preparedness.
- **Results confidence.** BioWatch has established a quality assurance effort that continually measures laboratory analysis performance and monitors field operations, providing users with confidence in the results. Independent test and evaluation events document the sensitivity and efficacy of BioWatch operations.
- **Technological innovation.** BioWatch continues to seek new technologies that will enable faster detection and reduce costs. Collaboration with stakeholders to identify requirements and with other organizations and the private sector to access and evaluate new and available technologies is an on-going process.

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