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Report Urges NIH to Address Nonhuman Primate Shortage

Facing a dwindling number of nonhuman primates (NHPs), NIH-funded investigators are experiencing “skyrocketing” increases in cost of up to 200% per animal and are being forced to scale back significant studies, “undermining the U.S. biomedical research enterprise and national health emergency readiness,” according to a new report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. The authors fault NIH for “inadequate coordination of research programs at the national level” and for not fully implementing recommendations in a 2018 NIH report, but also blame a Chinese export ban enacted in 2020 as contributing to the shortage. “The development and implementation of a national plan for nonhuman primate research resources would help ensure the availability of these important research models to meet the nation’s public health needs,” they suggested. Other recommendations include importing nonhuman primates and breeding them in the United States.

NHPs include rhesus macaques, baboons, marmosets and African green monkeys. In 2015, NIH started phasing out research involving chimpanzees and other great apes in most biomedical research but continues to support research with other types, albeit at declining funding levels. Based on investigators’ survey responses, the report found overall NHPs used in federally supported research had declined over the past decade. “A more than 20 percent reduction in cynomolgus macaque imports was reported in 2020 following China’s export ban, highlighting the vulnerability of NHP research caused by undue reliance on imported NHPs subject to geopolitical pressures and logistical constraints that jeopardize reliable access,” the report adds. “Approximately 64 percent of respondents to the [study] committee’s survey reported challenges with obtaining NHPs for their currently funded NIH awards. For greater than half of all active NIH awards reported by survey respondents, fewer NHPs were enrolled than originally planned. ... Impacts of NHP shortages have included increased wait times for NHP enrollment in studies,” according to the report. “It is now time for the nation’s leaders to take the action necessary to ensure that the United States maintains its scientific leadership and that biomedical investigators nationwide have the tools necessary to advance vital NIH-supported biomedical research,” said study committee chair Kenneth Ramos in the preface to the report. “Indeed, patients are waiting.” Ramos is also the associate vice president for research at Texas A&M University Health Science Center. NIH funded the study, which does not include agency responses to the recommendations.

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