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KATHLEEN KRAUSE
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
Kern County Administrative Center
1115 Truxtun Avenue, 5th Floor
Bakersfield, CA 93301
Telephone (661) 868-3585
TTY Relay (800) 735-2929

January 12, 2024

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Chair
House Energy & Commerce Committee
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: H.R. 6731 (Schweikert et al.), FORWARD ACT OF 2023 - SUPPORT

Dear Chair Rodgers,

The Kern County Board of Supervisors is pleased to support H.R. 6731, which would strengthen research and help advance treatment and vaccine development for *Coccidioidomycosis*, commonly known as Valley Fever, as well as other endemic fungal diseases.

Valley Fever is caused by species of the soil-dwelling fungus *Coccidioides* that can infect the lungs of humans, our canine companions, and many other mammalian species. The tiny seeds, or spores, become airborne and are inhaled into the lungs, where the infection starts. Valley Fever is a sickness of varying degree and severity, and the disease has no vaccine or cure. Valley Fever is often misdiagnosed because its symptoms resemble common illnesses, which can subsequently lead to dramatically underreported cases.

According to the Kern County Public Health Department, between 2014 and 2022 there have been an average of 2,487 cases of Valley Fever and 29 deaths related to the disease each year. A record high of 9,090 cases were reported statewide in 2019 by the State Department of Public Health. The case numbers reported in 2019 indicate a 19% increase over the state's all-time high in 2018 with annual cases trending higher for close to a decade. In 2021, there were just over 20,000 cases reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the most since 2011, signaling that Valley Fever is on the rise.

Not only is Valley Fever a serious illness, it is also a costly one. According to the CDC, nearly 75% of people with Valley Fever miss work and school. As many as 40% of people who get Valley Fever need to stay in the hospital, which costs a person an average of \$50,000.

The FORWARD Act of 2023 is designed to one day eliminate Valley Fever by:

- Authorizing \$500,000,000 to support public-private partnerships to prevent and slow the spread of Valley fever infections.
- Streamlining the process to approve new vaccines and treatments for Valley fever.
- Establishing a working group at the Department of Health and Human Services to advise on strategies that confront gaps in science that can help detect, treat, and eradicate Valley fever.

As Valley Fever cases have risen across the western United States over the last decade, it's critical that lawmakers continue to prioritize the delivery of medical breakthroughs that will help treat our family members and their beloved pets. This bipartisan legislation helps to combat Valley Fever by providing resources to further close the scientific gap in understanding this disease, support research, and accelerate vaccine development that will hopefully eradicate it once and for all.

For these reasons, the Kern County Board of Supervisors respectfully requests that you support **H.R. 6731** and help shepherd this legislation along through your committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'David Couch', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

David Couch, Chairman
Kern County Board of Supervisors

JZ/TB LEGGEN HR6731 FORWARD Act of 2023 – SUPPORT (Rodgers)

cc: Honorable Members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee
Honorable Members, Kern Congressional Delegation
National Association of Counties
David Wetmore, Carpi & Clay