

COMMENTARY

Expanding waiver of intellectual property protections could jeopardize US biotech dominance

US leaders, including Rhode Island's congressional delegation, must stand up for the US biotech industry as the WTO considers expanding a waiver of intellectual property protections to include COVID diagnostics and therapeutics

By **Carol Malysz** Updated December 6, 2022, 6:00 a.m.



R.I. state officials ceremonially broke ground in October on a \$165 million lab space project on former I-195 land in Providence. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Rhode Island's biotech sector is on the move.

The recent announcement of a potential [\\$50 million](#) investment in a proposed life science hub is the latest push to bring a robust life sciences sector to the Ocean State. The hub would further invest in R.I. startups, coordinate workforce development programs and leverage incentives, grants and credits for life sciences businesses.

This follows [earlier news](#) from Governor Dan McKee about construction of the state's new [health lab](#) in the I-195 Innovation and Design District. The project funded by a \$81.7 million grant from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will house the state's new health lab, labs for Brown University, and additional biotechnology space.

[Brown University](#) and [Wexford Science & Technology](#) also announced the transformation of 62,000 square feet at Wexford's Point 225 building in Providence into highly sought-after wet lab-ready research space by late 2023. Brown University will lease approximately 31,000 square feet of the new lab space, with the remainder available for lease by commercial life sciences companies.

These proposals speak to the state's commitment to both economic development and advancements in public health.

More than [400 biotech companies](#) and organizations call Rhode Island home. It's within striking distance of similar science-based hubs in Boston/Cambridge, New Haven and New York, along with prestigious institutions leading the way on innovative neurological research.

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However, recent actions by the World Trade Organization with the misguided support of the Biden administration could slam the brakes on the industry — here and across the country.

One of the most important policies under the WTO's authority is the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, or [TRIPS](#). This long-standing agreement, which has been signed by a majority of countries in the WTO, established intellectual property protections.

It is these very protections that made it possible for US companies to quickly develop the COVID vaccines in the first place.

But in June, those protections were turned upside down when the WTO, with an [endorsement](#) from the Biden administration, “waived” TRIPS, essentially giving the vaccine formulations away to other countries.

This move was completely unnecessary. The United States and other countries already have established programs to get vaccines to low- and middle-income countries.

The WTO is now [considering expanding the waiver](#) to include the intellectual property of COVID diagnostics and therapeutics. If allowed to go through, this will not only impact the ability of US biotech companies to continue to develop updated COVID treatments as the virus evolves, but potentially could impact research and investment into other diseases that uses the same technology to look for treatments for everything from cancer to auto-immune diseases to neurological disease.

We've seen great strides in research for neurological treatments right here in Rhode Island. Scientists at the [University of Rhode Island and Brown](#) are leaders in Alzheimer's disease research.

Why would we as a country jeopardize our biotech dominance? RI Bio has serious concerns about a potential expansion of the TRIPS waiver and has contacted our congressional delegation, requesting they stand up for Rhode Island's biotech industry.

The WTO should concentrate on fixing the infrastructure — lack of health care workers and last-mile distribution issues to name two — that are the true roadblocks to global public health challenges, and leave in place the protections that have brought hope and health to people around the world.

Our leaders cannot turn a blind eye to what could be a devastating blow to the biotech industry. I urge Rhode Island's lawmakers to stand up for our industry before more damage is done.

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