

Roll Call

‘Shark tank’ competition for new virus tests draws strong interest

‘The game is on,’ National Institutes of Health director says as applications surge



National Institutes of Health Director Dr. Francis Collins listens during a Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee hearing on new coronavirus tests on Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, Pool)

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A rapid contest aimed at accelerating new testing technologies for COVID-19 prompted the start of more than 1,000 applications in just eight days as of noon Wednesday, with 79 applications completed.

National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins said he was “delighted and somewhat astounded” at the volume since the initiative was announced April 29.

“In 27 years at NIH, I have honestly never seen anything move this quickly,” he told the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Thursday.

“The expert review team already in place has identified 20 of these completed applications that are ready to move into that first phase of intense scrutiny and the game is on,” he continued. “And it’s going to be a wild ride.”

Chairman Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., and Missouri Republican Roy Blunt championed a provision in the most recent coronavirus aid package to create a “shark tank” style competition accelerating promising new testing technologies.

Developers can win grants of up to \$500 million under the conditions of the \$1.5 billion National Institutes of Health initiative. Finalists will be matched with business and manufacturing partners, with a goal of distributing millions of new rapid tests by the end of summer or early fall.

“All roads back to work and back to school lead through testing,” Alexander said in his opening remarks.

The U.S. is now conducting around 1.8 million tests per week, according to the COVID Tracking Project. But some experts project the country could need the ability to run millions more per day, with one estimate suggesting as many as 35 million per day, to safely relax economic restrictions. Testing efforts have been hampered by shortages in swabs and chemical reagents used to analyze collected specimens.

Collins also announced the RADx initiative, as it’s called, will include a component for a demonstration project to implement testing in vulnerable and underrepresented communities. Federal and state officials are trying to increase data collection about how the virus is affecting different demographic groups as evidence mounts that minorities are disproportionately vulnerable.