

Florida senators unite on demand for emergency Zika funding

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Washington Bureau

Sens. Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio put aside their partisan differences Thursday to introduce legislation that would provide the full \$1.9 billion in supplemental appropriations sought by President Barack Obama to combat Zika.

Nelson, an Orlando Democrat, and Rubio, a Miami Republican, worked in concert to try to stop a compromise measure moving through the Senate that would authorize just \$1.1 billion to treat the deadly virus, fund preventative vaccine research and pay for stepped-up mosquito control.

Republicans who control Congress have refused to consider the emergency funding request Obama sent lawmakers in February.

"It's going to take \$1.9 billion to stop the spread of this virus, not \$1.1 billion," Nelson said.

With five new Zika infections identified this week, two of them in Miami-Dade, Florida has recorded 113 cases, the most in the country.

The political wrangling came as a top U.S. health official warned that the Southeastern United States is likely to see a local outbreak of the disease sometime soon.

Forty-five states have recorded Zika infections, but all of those are

thought to have been contracted from Zika-infected mosquitoes during travel in Latin America or the Caribbean or to have been passed by unprotected sex when an infected person returned to the United States.

But Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said it was only a matter of time before cases of the disease were passed on by local populations of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which is common throughout the Southern United States, particularly in the summer.

"I would be surprised if we did not see a local outbreak, likely in the Southeastern part (or) the Gulf Coast," he told a congressional hearing.

Those areas of the United States are most prone to local Zika outbreaks because they have the hot and humid conditions most hospitable to large mosquito populations.

Fauci said his projection was based in part on outbreaks in those areas of dengue and chikungunya, mosquito-borne viruses that are genetically related to Zika.

Republicans have refused to consider Obama's funding request until cuts to other programs are identified, to offset the increased spending.

Rubio called such a delay "politics" and said the seriousness of the Zika threat should move Congress to act.

"I've said repeatedly that Congress should not allow politics to delay action on Zika, and I'm hopeful we'll begin to see some meaningful action on this public health emergency very soon," Rubio said.

Nelson and Rubio said they planned to attach their measure as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, which the Senate

might take up as early as next week.

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee and a South Florida member of Congress, has introduced similar legislation in the House of Representatives.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murphy, who usually steers clear of politics as the government's top medical official, also urged Congress to act.

"We will need more resources to make sure that communities across our country can address a potential outbreak," Murphy said.

Pregnant women are especially vulnerable, he said, because Zika infections can cause microcephaly, which makes babies' heads abnormally small, and other birth defects.

Fauci expressed confidence that if Congress provides the full \$1.9 billion, scientists "will come through with a successful, safe and effective Zika vaccine." He cited the U.S. response to the Ebola outbreak in Africa in 2014, when lawmakers moved quickly to stem that virus's spread, as an example.

"We did a very good job (with Ebola), and I think we can do the same kind of job with Zika if we get the resources to respond appropriately," Fauci said.

Republican Gov. Rick Scott of Florida, who traveled to Washington on Wednesday to lobby for the funding, met Thursday with U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Burwell to discuss the crisis. She had traveled to Puerto Rico last month to see how the island territory is handling its Zika infections. More than 700 cases have been detected there.

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