

House to vote on scaled-back Zika bill despite veto threat

May 18 2016, by By Andrew Taylor



Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., left, accompanied by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Ky., speaks about Zika funding during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, May 17, 2016. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

Republicans controlling the House are ignoring protests from Democrats and a White House veto threat as they speed legislation funding the battle against the Zika virus to a vote.

The \$622 million GOP plan would provide one-third of the resources requested three months ago by President Barack Obama to combat the virus, which can cause severe birth defects and other health problems. It is "paid for" with cuts elsewhere in the budget, including unspent funds from the successful fight against Ebola.

The White House has issued a veto threat on the House measure, saying it is woefully inadequate and protested that it would only fund the Zika battle through September.

"The House of Representatives is three months late and more than a billion short," White House press secretary Josh Earnest said.

Wednesday's scheduled House vote would follow a bipartisan 68-29 Senate procedural tally to advance a \$1.1 billion measure to fight Zika through September 2017. It is set to be attached to a pending appropriations bill.

While the Senate measure is financed as emergency legislation that isn't subject to budget limits, GOP leaders such as House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin insisted that the House bill carry offsetting spending cuts. Whether to pair the Zika money with spending cuts appears to be the most difficult issue in upcoming House-Senate negotiations.

Top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell of Kentucky swung behind the compromise measure, calling it "a targeted approach that focuses on immediate needs while also providing resources for longer-term goals like a vaccine."

Zika is mainly a threat to unborn children and can cause a serious birth defect called microcephaly and other severe birth defects. Zika is commonly spread by mosquitoes, though all of the more than 500 cases in the continental U.S. have been linked to overseas travel.

Republicans say the administration has padded its Zika request and that there is plenty of unspent money in the budget to ameliorate its impact on the budget deficit. Top Republicans such as Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers of Kentucky have successfully pressured the administration to unspent Ebola funds to finance almost \$600 million in anti-Zika efforts such as research on the virus and Zika-related [birth defects](#), response teams to limit Zika's spread, and helping other countries fight the virus.

"This funding bill is the next step in our response," Rogers said, promising it'll be enough "to fight and prevent the spread of the Zika virus for the rest of this fiscal year" on Sept. 30.

The GOP measure provides funding for vaccine research, controlling the mosquitoes that spread Zika, develop better tests to detect Zika, and money to foreign governments to quell mosquito populations and inform people how to avoid getting the virus.

Democrats say the GOP measure is inadequate and will slow the testing of a vaccine, underfund mosquito control, and doesn't provide enough aid to battle Zika overseas.

"The Republican bill does not allow us to finish the job," said top Appropriations Committee Democrat Nita Lowey of New York. "It provides only \$622 million. ... We did not offset spending to respond to similar public health emergencies such as the Ebola and H1N1 influenza viruses. Why require offsets for Zika funding?"

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Citation: House to vote on scaled-back Zika bill despite veto threat (2016, May 18) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-05-house-vote-scaled-back-zika-bill.html>

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