

Mosquito season brings no urgency for money to fight Zika

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In this Feb. 11, 2016 file photo of aedes aegypti mosquitoes are seen in a mosquito cage at a laboratory in Cucuta, Colombia. The White House and Democrats are pressuring congressional Republicans to act on President Barack Obama's demands for money to combat the Zika virus, but even the onset of mosquito season sure to spread the virus has failed to create a sense of urgency. (AP Photo/Ricardo Mazalan, File)

The White House and Democrats are pressuring congressional Republicans to act on President Barack Obama's demands for money to combat Zika, but even the onset of mosquito season that probably will spread the virus has failed to create a sense of urgency.

Republicans from states at greatest risk, such as Florida, Texas, Louisiana and Georgia, have been slow to endorse Obama's more than 2-month-old request for \$1.9 billion to battle the virus, which causes grave birth defects. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently reports more than 470 cases in the continental U.S., all so far associated with travel to Zika-affected areas.

Polls show that the public isn't anywhere nearly as scared of Zika as it was about the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the handful of cases in the U.S. in 2014. Aides to GOP lawmakers, even those representing Southern areas most vulnerable to Zika, say they've yet to hear from many anxious constituents, though they said this could change. "Very few calls/letters," emailed a spokeswoman for Rep. Ander Crenshaw, R-Fla.

On Monday, the National Governors Associated weighed in, urging the administration and lawmakers returning to Washington "to work together to reach agreement on the appropriate funding levels needed to prepare for and combat the Zika virus."

The congressional response to Zika contrasts sharply with the rush last year to pass legislation to curb the admission of Syrian refugees, which passed the House less than a week after terrorist attacks in Paris. Syrian refugees were erroneously linked to the attack.

"Any time there's a public health issue, bordering on crisis, there's obviously some urgency," said Rep. David Jolly, R-Fla., who's running to replace Republican Sen. Marco Rubio. Jolly added, however, that "I

don't know that it has become a political issue in Florida as much as it has inside the Beltway."

One voice for immediate action, however, is Rubio, who's leaving the Senate after his unsuccessful presidential bid.

"It is just a matter of days, weeks, hours before you open up a newspaper or turn on the news, and it will say that someone in the continental United States was bitten by a mosquito and they contracted Zika," Rubio said in an April 28 floor speech. "When that happens, everyone is going to be freaked outThis is going to happen."

Rubio also has appealed for congressional action to aid debt-ridden Puerto Rico, another unresolved issue as lawmakers return to Washington on Monday for a brief, three-week May congressional session. The House may act on legislation to combat opioid abuse and perhaps belatedly pass a budget while the Senate struggles to make headway on the annual spending bills after a dispute over last year's Iran nuclear deal enveloped a popular energy and water projects measure.

Thus far, Rubio's urgency on Zika is not widely shared, though Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, the No. 2 Republican, drew attention when he told reporters in Houston last month that "the risk of underreacting is really too high to take any chances."

"Sometimes the wheels of Congress move very slowly," Cornyn said. "But we want to make sure we're not writing blank checks."

One reason for the slow pace may be Ebola, which affected far fewer people but created more public fear than Zika has. The Ebola panic proved to be unjustified and was contained to just a handful of U.S. cases

A poll in March by the Kaiser Family Foundation found by a more t han 2-to-1 margin that respondents said the government is doing enough to fight Zika. But an October 2014 Kaiser poll on Ebola found that only about half of respondents thought the government was doing enough.

Just 34 percent of those polled on Zika were worried that someone in their family would be affected by the virus, versus 65 percent who were not worried; the comparable figures on Ebola showed 45 percent worried someone in their family would get sick from Ebola, versus 54 percent who were not worried.

In addition, Congress approved \$5 billion to battle Ebola in 2014 and perhaps half of that money is unspent, though the administration has designs to use it to help other lesser developed countries build up their health care systems. The threat of Ebola has not been wholly snuffed out.

In April, the administration bowed to pressure from Republicans and diverted almost \$600 million in previously approved funds, including more than \$500 million in remaining Ebola money, toward fighting Zika. That has bought time for Republicans to seek greater details and potentially respond to Obama's request by including Zika funds in an upcoming spending bill that could be delivered to the president before Congress recesses in mid-July for seven weeks. One option is adding the money to a popular measure funding politically sacrosanct veterans programs.

"We are still waiting for answers from the administration to basic questions, such as what is needed right now, over the next five months to fight Zika," Crenshaw said.

Just one other GOP lawmaker, Florida Rep. Vern Buchanan, has endorsed Obama's \$1.9 billion request. "Instead of working together to

protect Americans, Washington has descended into another partisan fight," Buchanan said.

Still, it's clear the White House won't get anything approaching its \$1.9 billion request for emergency money to battle Zika. Senate Republicans privately floated a \$1.1 billion Zika-fighting measure, but House Republicans are likely to press for a lesser amount—and require offsetting spending cuts elsewhere in the budget, an idea that the administration has not ruled out.

More information: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
www.cdc.gov/zika/index.html

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