

Inaction on Zika funding likely to delay vaccine testing

July 12 2016, by Andrew Taylor And Mary Clare Jalonick



House Republicans rush to a closed-door GOP caucus with House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wis., on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, July 12, 2016. Congress is expected to exit Washington for a months-long recess with no action on gun control, despite mass shootings in recent weeks and uproar from Democrats who have pushed for new legislation. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

The Obama administration on Tuesday cautioned top lawmakers that continued gridlock over legislation to combat the Zika virus could delay research and development of a vaccine to protect against Zika and tests

to detect it.

The warning came in a letter from White House budget chief Shaun Donovan and Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Burwell and says that failure by Congress to pass anti-Zika funds before exiting Washington for its extended summer recess would "significantly impede the administration's ability to prepare for and respond" to the Zika threat this summer and beyond.

The delay in funding vaccine development is perhaps the most damaging result of a divided Washington's inability to agree on an anti-Zika funding bill five months after President Barack Obama's request.

"It's going to take that much longer to prove that the vaccine works," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health, who says testing next January on a promising vaccine faces delays. "If it takes that much longer to prove that it works then you take that much longer to get it out to the people who need it."

The impasse on Zika shows no signs of softening, even though taking a seven-week vacation without addressing the problem could be politically perilous for both Republicans controlling Congress and Democrats blocking Republicans' \$1.1 billion take-it-or-leave-it measure to battle the virus.

Democrats last month filibustered a GOP-drafted Zika measure, largely over provisions in the bill to block Planned Parenthood from receiving money. A revote is expected to produce the same result this week, but Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has rejected efforts to reopen the measure, which faces a veto threat from the White House.

Obama requested \$1.9 billion in February to battle Zika, but Congress

has moved slowly in response. The Senate passed a bipartisan \$1.1 billion measure in May while the House adopted a smaller, more partisan measure. The House-Senate compromise, worked out by top GOP leaders last month in talks that froze out Democrats, was blocked by Senate Democrats two weeks ago on a mostly party-line filibuster vote.

A Senate Democratic aide said Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., Monday night broached a compromise with Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., to separate the Zika issue from a veterans funding bill, strip away the Planned Parenthood-related provision and dump a provision that would ease rules on pesticide spraying.



House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich., left, Rep. Michael C. Burgess, R-Texas, right, and other House Republicans rush to a closed-door GOP caucus with House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wis., on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, July 12, 2016. Congress is expected to exit Washington for a months-long recess with no action on gun control, despite mass shootings in recent weeks and uproar from Democrats who have pushed for new

legislation. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

In exchange, Democrats would have accepted a modest package of spending cuts to help defray the cost of the measure.

McConnell, however, dismissed the offer, refusing to disavow the House GOP position on denying new money to Planned Parenthood and saying it is too late and too cumbersome to try to advance a new compromise measure in the days remaining before the recess. He said House Republicans would reject such a measure anyway in an apparent reference to the controversy over Planned Parenthood.

"The time for a debate about the content of it is over," McConnell said.

As issue is \$95 million in social services grants for help Puerto Rico deal with its Zika epidemic. The GOP measure doesn't explicitly mention Planned Parenthood—which is loathed by anti-abortion Republicans—but makes sure the organization's Puerto Rico affiliates are ineligible for funding to provide contraception and Zika-related health care. That caused an uproar among Democrats, though the practical impact of the ban would be limited.

"Republicans have no desire to work with us to get a bipartisan Zika funding bill to the president—now, or any time in the future. It's all been a charade," Reid said. "Republicans are interested in one thing only: attacking Planned Parenthood."

An infection by the Zika virus can cause grave birth defects. Among the other consequences of the impasse on Zika, the administration says, is a slowdown in government-funded research to develop a fuller understanding of Zika's effects on pregnant women and their unborn

children.

Meanwhile, Republicans said that because the administration has been slow to disburse almost \$600 million in already available anti-Zika funds, the failure of Congress to act before recessing until after Labor Day won't have major effects.

"At this moment they still have money, but it won't last forever," said Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., who chairs a panel with budgeting jurisdiction over health programs, including research at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We're getting to the point where both the CDC and the NIH are actually running out of money, and we have important work to do," Fauci said.

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Citation: Inaction on Zika funding likely to delay vaccine testing (2016, July 12) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-07-inaction-zika-funding-vaccine.html>

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