

Senate Democrats press for \$1.9B to fight Zika virus

April 18 2016, by By Andrew Taylor

Democrats are pressing top Senate Republicans to stop dragging their feet and act immediately on President Barack Obama's request for \$1.9 billion to combat the Zika virus.

More than 40 of the chamber's Democrats Monday signed on to a letter to Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., demanding a Senate vote on additional Zika funds. The White House says the money is urgently needed to fight the spread of mosquitoes that transmit the virus, develop a vaccine and help other countries battle Zika.

"For more than two months, Congress has failed to respond to the administration's Zika request. But more importantly, Congress has failed to address a disease that has infected nearly 700 Americans in 40 states, Washington, D.C., and 3 U.S. territories, including more than 65 [pregnant women](#)," the letter read.

Zika can cause severe birth defects, including microcephaly, a condition in which a baby's head is far smaller than normal.

Obama has redirected more than \$500 million in unspent funds to fight Ebola but the White House says it's only a temporary solution. Republicans are signaling that they'll provide some Zika money, but they haven't said how much or how soon. But it appears plain that they want to provide some Zika money before departing Washington for seven weeks for the political conventions and the traditional August recess.

Republicans are demanding greater detail about the request; the White House has responded by turning up the political heat.

"This story, the Zika virus and its spread through mosquitoes and the risk that it poses to pregnant women, is going to be dominating the news. This is going to be leading all your news broadcasts. This is going to be on the front page of newspapers across the country," White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said on Friday. "And I don't know what Republicans are going to say that they did to prepare for it."

Last week, House Appropriations Committee Democrats sought to attach Obama's Zika request to an unrelated spending bill but were denied by Republicans controlling the panel. In the companion Senate panel, the possibility that Democrats might try to attach the full \$1.9 billion request prompted Republicans to prepare for a smaller alternative in the \$700 million range.

On the Sunday talk shows, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said Zika should not be a consideration for women in the U.S. who are considering getting pregnant. He said it's hoped that the number of cases of Zika would remain limited.

"I don't want to get into the politics of it, but I can just tell you, from a public health and a research standpoint, we do really need that resource in order to be able to get the job done," Fauci said on CBS' "Face The Nation."

"It would be shortsighted and dangerous for Congress not to act quickly to give the Administration the resources it needs to fully fight the Zika virus and protect Americans," the Democrats' letter stated. "The Zika threat requires a much broader, more comprehensive response and we should not force our public health officials to choose between funding

Ebola or Zika efforts."

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