

Despite House OK, Zika aid bill faces long odds to passage

June 23 2016, by Andrew Taylor

A \$1.1 billion compromise measure to combat the Zika virus made it through the House on Thursday, but faces a filibuster from Senate Democrats and opposition from the White House over spending cuts and GOP provisions on health care and the environment.

The 239-171 pre-dawn vote sent the measure to the Senate, where a test vote was planned for next week. A veto threat was expected from President Barack Obama.

The fate of the compromise worked out by House and Senate Republicans seemed certain, and it was unclear what alternative might emerge, given the hard feelings surrounding the issue and the short timetable ahead.

The Zika plan came out late Wednesday and won approval in the House hours later. That vote came after Democrats took over the House floor for more than 24 hours, well into Thursday, in protest of GOP inaction on gun legislation. Republican leaders called the Zika vote abruptly, permitted no debate and immediately adjourned through July 4.

The result was more of the partisanship that has dogged the Zika proposal from the start and raised questions about whether lawmakers will manage to approve any assistance in the short time left before they leave Washington in mid-July for the political conventions.

The measure matches a bipartisan \$1.1 billion figure adopted by the

Senate last month to fight the virus, which can cause grave defects and can be transmitted by mosquitoes and sexual contact.

The House was largely satisfied in their demand to pair Zika aid with about \$750 million in offsetting cuts to spending, including \$543 million in unused funds from implementation of Obama's [health care law](#) and \$107 million in cuts to leftover Ebola money.

Democrats objected. They cited restrictions that effectively would block Planned Parenthood from delivering birth control services under a \$95 million grant program and they complained about a watered-down version of a provision backed by the House that would ease rules on pesticide applications to battle the mosquitoes that can spread Zika.

"This plan from congressional Republicans is four months late and nearly a billion dollars short," said White House press secretary Josh Earnest.

Obama requested \$1.9 billion four months ago to fight Zika. Republicans initially displayed little urgency to respond to the request and forced the administration to devote more than \$500 million of unspent Ebola money on Zika.

Democrats also said it was wrong to require spending cuts to pay for a response to a public health crisis while not requiring them for past emergencies such as wildfires, floods and Ebola.

Republicans said the cuts were relatively innocuous. For instance, the \$543 million cut to Obama's health law was to a pot of money aimed at helping territories set up health insurance exchanges under the law. None did so. Also, Democrats privately indicated they could live with the additional \$100 million-plus cut to overseas Ebola aid.

Democrats on the Senate Appropriations Committee had engaged in talks about the offsetting cuts, but leaders such as Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., took a harder line that ultimately prevailed.

The Zika money was added to an \$82 billion measure covering the Department of Veterans Affairs and military construction projects. That measure is among the most popular of the 12 annual appropriations bills, and Republicans held out hope that its popularity might break free enough Democrats to squeak through the Senate.

More than 2,200 cases of Zika infection have been reported in the U.S. and its territories. In Puerto Rico, more than 400 pregnant women were at risk of having babies with major deformities such as microcephaly, a condition in which newborns have smaller brains that might not have developed properly.

The virus is spread mainly through the bite of a tropical mosquito called *Aedes aegypti*. It can be found in the southern United States, but there's no evidence that they've been spreading the virus in the mainland U.S. yet.

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