

Why Did Sen. Johnson Vote Against a Bipartisan Bill on Zika?

Written by Democratic Party of Wisconsin, Brandon Weathersby
Wednesday, 18 May 2016 09:04 -



MADISON – Senator Johnson reminded voters again today that he is more interested in protecting the interests of his fellow Republicans in Washington than in protecting the people of Wisconsin. He joined 28 other extreme Republicans in voting against a bipartisan bill to combat a public health crisis. Wisconsinites deserve to know why.

[Politico: Senate OKs \\$1.1 billion to fight Zika; House wants half that](#)

By Jennifer Haberkorn
May 17, 2016

The Senate on Tuesday approved a bipartisan deal to partially fund the Obama administration's request for emergency funding to fight Zika, but the bill is still too large for conservatives in the House and far from getting to the president's desk.

The Senate advanced the \$1.1 billion bill on a procedural vote and nixed two related measures — one to fully fund the administration's \$1.9 billion request and another smaller package that would have been paid for by cutting Obamacare.

Republicans in the House support about half of the Senate funding, which House Appropriations Chairman [Hal Rogers](#) called a "bridge too far at this point."

Rogers has introduced a \$622 million plan — which is expected to get a vote later this week — that was "very well received" in Tuesday's House GOP conference meeting, he said.

The White House said the House measure could face a veto from President Barack Obama, a sure sign that House Democrats would oppose it. So do some Republicans. Sen. [Marco Rubio](#) (R-Fla.), whose state is most threatened by Zika, called the House plan "playing with fire."

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The divide between House and Senate Republicans is coming to a head after months of congressional squabbling over the administration's funding request as the summer mosquito season approaches. The Zika virus, which has been directly linked to the severe birth defect microcephaly, is already spreading through mosquitoes in Puerto Rico. Local transmission of the virus is expected to take place in the continental United States — particularly the southern states — this summer.

The Obama administration has already moved about \$600 million in unspent Ebola funds to the Zika fight. But HHS Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell, who has been lobbying individual lawmakers to approve the funding, argues that much more is needed to help control the mosquito population, to develop vaccines and to improve testing of the virus.

House Republicans are feeling pressure to back the White House request.

"[I]f we fail to deal with the issue and there are hardships that would be posed on society in this country, you wouldn't be able to compute those costs," said Rep. [Steve Womack](#) (R-Ark.). "It's a dice roll to get into an argument about Zika funding and running the risk in having something catastrophic happen and we own it."

Sen. [Roy Blunt](#) (R-Mo.), who led negotiations on the Senate plan with Democratic Sen. [Patty Murray](#), anticipated that a final package won't come together for a "few weeks" and that the House could be open to additional funding. The House plan provides funding through September 2016 and the Senate plan goes through September 2017.

"The fact that they're voting on \$622 million to go between now and Sept. 30 indicates the House, like the Senate, is interested in finding a solution," Blunt told reporters. The length of time and whether the plan is paid for or not "will be basis for whatever negotiations happens."

Before the Senate bill passed on a 68-29 vote, Rubio blasted the House effort.

"Frankly, that's just not going to cut it," he said. "If we don't spend more than that on the front

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end, I think we're going to spend a lot more later ... because the problem is not going to go away."

House Republicans argue the Obama administration has not provided enough detail on what the money would be spent on, and when. They say that the administration wants a blank check and the ability to move unspent funds into other programs.

"You can't just throw out a number and say, 'Oh, I need \$2 billion,'" said Rep. [Ander Crenshaw](#) (R-Fla.). "They said, 'We need \$5 billion for Ebola,' which they got and there's \$2 billion left over. It's better to tell us what you're going to do with the money."

The Senate package eliminated what Blunt said was at least one \$85 million request to build two new buildings he said were unrelated to the Zika fight.

Obama administration officials say they have sent detailed proposals to Congress and that combatting the virus — which is new to the continental United States and has many unanswered questions — will require flexibility.

Democratic Sen. [Brian Schatz](#), whose state of Hawaii could be particularly susceptible to the virus, is concerned that if the full funding request isn't approved now, the White House will have to ask Congress to come back into session in the fall to approve more funding.

"This is the most basic test of governing. This isn't a matter of political philosophy; this is a matter of competence," he said. Republicans "have got to show that they can be trusted with the keys to the car and right now it's not clear."

Even if the House were to approve the Senate's Zika funding amount, it is unclear whether the president would actually sign the legislation. The Senate attached the funding to a transportation and military funding bill; on Monday, the White House said staff would recommend a veto to the spending package for reasons unrelated to Zika.

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Blunt indicated Tuesday that the Zika funding would likely be pulled into a separate bill or separate legislation.