



\$1.8 Billion Request to Fight Zika May Gain Bipartisan Traction

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As the outbreak of Zika virus becomes a major international health concern, the White House is wagering that Congress will feel compelled to inject \$1.8 billion in emergency spending to develop vaccines, improve diagnostic testing and expand research into the disease.

President Barack Obama said Monday that his administration is requesting a package to combat the spread of Zika, which is typically transmitted through mosquitoes but also can be sexually transmitted. Symptoms include a fever, rash, and joint pain. The virus has been linked to a surge of infants in Brazil born with microcephaly, a condition that results in abnormally small heads.

Both parties have endorsed a speedy response, scheduling hearings and briefings in the weeks ahead. Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell will brief senators Tuesday, and the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health will hold a hearing Wednesday.

“Zika is a real concern, which is why our committee will hold a hearing on February 24th to assess how we can help prevent the spread of the virus in South and Central America and how much of a concern this will be here in the United States,” said Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Chairman Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn. “I am reviewing the administration's funding request and will ask more about it at the hearing.”

The administration proposal would send \$828 million to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to focus on mosquito control programs, \$250 million to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to assist pregnant women in Puerto Rico, \$200 million to the National Institutes of Health to accelerate vaccine research and diagnostic development and \$210 million for other HHS response activities.

The World Health Organization declared Zika a public health emergency while the CDC issued travel warnings to pregnant women and urged men to use condoms during sex if they may have been exposed to Zika. The virus has been actively transmitted in a list of South and Central American countries, as well as countries in Africa and Asia, according to the CDC.

Despite the ramped-up attention, some components of Zika remain a mystery. There is mounting but as yet inconclusive evidence that the virus can cause microcephaly. There are also questions swirling around how Zika is transmitted. The disease was sexually transmitted in some instances, and researchers also discovered the presence of the virus in saliva and urine.

Boosting funding for research may answer some of these questions, as well as foster a deeper understanding of Zika's history and the fundamental science surrounding it, according to Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. But Fauci emphasized at a White House press briefing on Monday that mosquitoes remain the primary way the virus is transmitted and urged people to follow federal guidelines.

Fauci said the emergency funding would go towards procuring a vaccine, indicating that there is already a candidate that could be in the first phase of clinical trials by this summer.

He also said funding can help create diagnostic testing to more quickly determine if someone has been infected by Zika. Currently, it takes several steps to diagnose the disease because of its similarity to other viruses.

A Republican spokeswoman for the House Appropriations Committee said the panel will carefully review the request when it is received. Meanwhile, the GOP staff on the Senate Appropriations Committee said the panel is working to better understand the Zika virus and will weigh the proposal, as well as review previously appropriated funding that could be used to research and treat the disease.

Bipartisan Concern

Democratic appropriators seemed generally supportive of Obama's request. By comparison, Congress provided \$5.4 billion in emergency funding in 2014 to help combat the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

"I am deeply concerned about the outbreak of the Zika virus—this is a serious situation that requires an all-hands on deck response from the federal government working in partnership with the World Health Organization and affected nations," said Senate Appropriations ranking Democrat Barbara A. Mikulski of Maryland. "I will be evaluating the President's supplemental funding request to ensure that it both meets the criteria for emergency spending and provides the resources necessary to stop the spread of this virus."

The emergency funding request also includes \$335 million for the U.S. Agency for International Development and seeks to use unspent appropriated funds from the U.S. response to the 2014 Ebola crisis. The requested USAID money is intended to help impacted countries improve their ability to control the mosquitoes that transmit the virus and encourage work on vaccines and diagnostics. Maternal health and public health education on preventing Zika and caring for children born with microcephaly also would receive funding support under the request, which targets South America, Central America, and the Caribbean.

Reproductive health advocates note that under current federal rules, none of the requested USAID money can be used to fund the abortions of women who contracted Zika and fear giving birth to babies with microcephaly. The Helms Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1973 (PL 93-189) does not allow U.S. foreign aid to be used to pay for abortions for family planning purposes.

"While research is still not clear on the causation between Zika virus and fetal abnormalities, this situation underscores the need to ensure that U.S. foreign aid is not a barrier to women accessing the reproductive health care they need, including safe abortion access," said Serra Sippel, president of the Center for Health and Gender Equity, which wants the Obama administration to use its executive authority to reinterpret the Helms amendment to allow for U.S. assistance to support foreign abortions under certain circumstances such as rape. "The Helms amendment restricts foreign aid for abortion as a method of family planning, and it is time for the administration to interpret the law correctly."