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PROMO

STEM CELLS: President Bush issued the first veto of his presidency to embryonic stem cell legislation.

ABORTION: Senate scheduled to vote on legislation that would make it a federal crime to take minors across state lines to obtain abortions in order to circumvent state parental notification and consent laws.

"SUNSET LAWS": Groups representing the elderly and disabled fear legislation establishing "sunset" commissions could hurt Medicare, Medicaid.

LABOR HHS: Senate panel approves Fiscal 2007 measure funding the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education.

INTRO: As expected, President Bush issued the first veto of his presidency July 19 when he vetoed legislation that would have removed existing constraints on federal funding of embryonic research. Meanwhile, the Senate is scheduled to vote this week on legislation that would make it a federal crime to take minors across state lines to obtain abortions in order to circumvent state parental notification and consent laws. Advocates for seniors and the disabled say that legislation headed for the House floor that would establish "sunset" commissions aimed at eliminating wasteful federal programs could end up eliminating programs such as Medicare and Medicaid while the Senate appropriations panel approved that chamber's version of Labor-HHS funding legislation.

STEM CELLS

Question 1: As expected, the Senate cleared and President Bush vetoed legislation that would have expanded federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. Could you recap that for us?

Answer: The Senate cleared the measure by a vote of 63-47, which was four votes short of the margin that would have been needed for the chamber to override Bush's expected veto. When Bush vetoed the bill, he said the legislation "crosses a moral boundary" and would support "the taking of innocent human life in the hope of finding medical benefits for others." The House attempted to override Bush's veto but that effort came up short by 51 votes.

Question 2: The Senate and House also took action on other stem cell research measures. What were those bills?

Answer: The Senate passed and the House cleared and the president signed into law legislation (S 3504) that makes it illegal to perform research on embryos from "fetal farms," where human embryos could be created for the purpose of harvesting tissue and organs. A third measure (S 2754), which would support research into ways to obtain stem cells without destroying embryos, passed the Senate but failed to clear the House. House leaders had put that bill on the chamber's "suspension" calendar, which means it requires a two-thirds majority to pass, which the bill failed to do. The hope among GOP leaders was to send all three bills to the president's desk at the same time so he would sign one into law and veto the other two, but that did not occur.

Question 3: What's next in this debate?

Answer: Backers of the vetoed measure certainly have not given up. One of those supporters, Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., said she is exploring other options to advance the embryonic stem cell measure in the House, including attaching its provisions to other legislation. Democrats also have moved quickly to make Bush's veto a issue on the campaign trail because they believe Bush's veto will be unpopular with voters and may help Democrats win big in the fall elections. Republicans, however, say the issue will not be decisive in close races this fall.

ABORTION

Question 4: The Senate is scheduled to vote this week on legislation dealing with abortion. What's in that bill?

Answer: The measure would make it a federal crime to take minors across state lines to obtain abortions in order to circumvent state parental notification and consent laws. Under terms of the agreement for floor debate, senators will consider several amendments before voting on the measure (S 403) on July 25. One of those amendments is a Democratic proposal that would exempt grandparents and clergy members. But the measure's sponsor, Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., says that such an exemption is not necessary because parental notification and consent laws in the states must give minors the option of seeking approval from a judge instead of her parents.

Question 5: What are the bill's chances?

Answer: The chamber is expected to pass the bill, which is another in a series of narrowly targeted abortion-related bills that GOP leaders have moved through Congress in recent years. Senate Democrats have blocked the bill in the past, but given the popularity of parental consent laws, Senate Democratic leaders would prefer to keep voters' attention on other issues, such as the Iraq War, gas prices and increasing the minimum wage.

Question 6: Has the House passed this bill?

Answer: The House passed a similar measure (HR 748) by a 270-157 margin last year after rejecting a similar grandparent/clergy exemption. If the Senate does pass the measure, a House-Senate conference would have to resolve differences between the two bills.

"SUNSET" COMMISSIONS

Question 7: House and Senate Republicans are sponsoring legislation that would create "sunset" commissions aimed at eliminating wasteful federal programs. Could you tell us about that?

Answer: Seniors' groups, labor unions and other organizations are urging House and Senate members to reject the legislation, which the House Government Reform Committee approved last week and is headed to the House floor. The so-called "sunset" commissions, which are backed by House leaders, have long been sought by fiscal conservatives as a tool to eliminate programs they consider wasteful. But Democrats have blasted the measure, saying it would endanger federal agencies and shift powers to the president and unelected commissions.

Question 8: Some advocates for the elderly and disabled fear such commissions could endanger programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. Why?

Answer: Representatives those groups say they fear that programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security which enjoy broad, popular support throughout the country could be overhauled or even eliminated by a narrow, perhaps partisan, majority. Commission proposals would be

considered without significant public discussion and with extremely limited debate on the Hill and could pass with a simple majority vote, opponents fear.

Question 9: What are the bill's chances?

Answer: In the House, the measure faces opposition from moderates and top appropriators, as well as Democrats, so passage may not be easy. But even if the House passed the measure, there is little chance of Senate passage.

LABOR-HHS

Question 10: The Senate Appropriations Committee approved a \$606 billion fiscal year 2007 spending bill for the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education. Could you give us the highlights?

Answer: The discretionary spending amount included in the bill is \$1.3 billion more than what was allocated in fiscal 2006 and \$5 billion more than President Bush requested. It includes \$11.6 billion for the Department of labor, \$64.2 billion for HHS and \$55.8 billion for the Education Department. Funding for the National Institutes of Health is \$28.5 billion. That amount is \$220 million more than was allocated in 2006 and \$200 million more than what Bush requested, but the amount falls short of the amount that many lawmakers, including Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., who chairs the Senate Labor-HHS Appropriations subcommittee.

Question 11: What about funding for other health programs?

Answer: Community health centers would receive about \$1.9 billion, an increase of \$145 million over last year, lower than the \$206 million increase the House passed earlier this year. Other funding levels in the bill include \$6.1 billion for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention -- \$262 million more than Bush requested and about \$22 million more than in the House bill, but \$19 million below fiscal 2006 spending. In addition, the CDC would get \$119 million to prepare for a possible avian flu pandemic.