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Bush likely to veto stem cell bill

DAVID ESPO, *Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Congress intends to send President Bush legislation next week to ease restrictions on federally funded embryonic stem cell research, inviting his second veto in as many years on the subject.

As was the case last year, Bush appears likely to make his veto stick. Several Democratic officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Wednesday that supporters of the bill appear to lack the two-thirds majority needed to override him.

U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., a leading advocate of the legislation, did not dispute that assessment in an interview. "If he does veto it again it will just show his complete unwillingness to look at this research that holds the potential for cure of these diseases," she said.

Both houses passed legislation on the subject earlier in the year. The final vote is expected today in the House.

Public opinion polls show strong support for the research, and it could return as an issue in the 2008 elections. Supporters of the research say it holds great promise in the quest for treatments of Alzheimer's and other illnesses.

Critics counter that it is immoral because it involves the destruction of human embryos. In threatening a veto this year Bush said it "crossed a moral line that I and many others find troubling."

There was no federal money for the work until Bush announced on Aug. 9, 2001, that his administration would make it available for lines of stem cells that were in existence. Elected with the strong support of abortion foes and other conservatives, he said at the time his decision was designed to balance concerns about "protecting life and improving life."

He also limited the funds to cell lines derived from embryos that were surplus at fertility clinics, and that had been donated from adults who had given informed consent.

Bush vetoed legislation to allow funding of additional lines of embryonic stem cells last year when it passed over the objections of Republicans then in control.

Former U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz, R-Battle Creek, was one of that bill's main backers. A physician, he continues to push for legislation as a member of the nonprofit group Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures.

Democrats made the legislation a top priority when they took control of the House and Senate in January.

The House approved an initial measure within days of convening on a 253-174 vote was short of a veto-proof majority.

The Senate passed a slightly different measure in April, 63-34, a margin that suggested supporters were one vote short of two-thirds.

DeGette said the change inserted into the bill in the Senate encourages the federal government to conduct research into alternative therapies.