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Backers to strategize on stem-cell bill

One option for passing the measure, which would expand federal funding, is to add it to a bill Bush will have a hard time vetoing.

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The Denver Post

Article Last Updated:04/24/2007 12:27:26 AM MDT

Washington - Leaders of a congressional effort to boost embryonic stem-cell research will huddle soon to develop strategies for passing their bill around President Bush's promised veto.

One option is adding the legislation to a bill Bush will have a harder time vetoing.

"There's going to be a bill at some time that President Bush has to sign," said Jennifer Mullin, spokeswoman for Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa, a co-sponsor of the bill passed in the Senate earlier this month.

Rep. Diana DeGette of Colorado, Democratic author of the House version of the bill, said she would repeatedly add it to legislation that goes to Bush - an approach that could make for a lengthy game of political ping-pong.

Political analysts and opponents of the research predict Bush would repeatedly veto any bill that contains the language of DeGette's legislation.

"He's so much on record as opposing this that he cannot afford to sign a bill with that attached," said Thomas Mann, political analyst with the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank.

In a 2001 executive order, Bush limited federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research to work on lines already in existence.

DeGette's bill would remove Bush's restrictions. It would allow funding on lines using embryos created for in vitro fertilization and slated for disposal.

Bush vetoed the legislation last summer after it passed the Republican-controlled Congress. And he's vowed to do so a second time.

Research support grows

"There is a temptation to manipulate life in ways that do not respect the humanity of the person," Bush said at a prayer breakfast shortly after the Senate passed the bill. "When that happens, the most vulnerable among us can be valued for their utility to others, instead of their own inherent worth."

The battle between Bush and Congress comes as polls show growing support for embryonic stem-cell research. Many scientists say it could have the unique ability to provide better treatments for incurable diseases.

As the debate rages in Washington, research continues outside the U.S. and in states that provide money or grants for embryonic stem-cell research. For Colorado, which does not, the result is the potential loss of one of the top researchers at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.

Dr. Curt Freed said he is considering going to California, one of six states that now fund embryonic stem-cell research.

"The financial situation in California for stem-cell research is so much better," said Freed, who uses embryonic stem cells in search of cures for Parkinson's disease.

He said stem-cell treatments on Parkinson's patients could occur as early as 2008, even without a change in Bush's policy.

Democrats pushed the issue as part of their platform in the 2006 midterm elections. If Bush vetoes the bill again, and if Congress forces repeated vetoes, that could push the issue into the 2008 election.

"The opposition party is never entirely sorry when a president vetoes a popular piece of legislation," said Ross Baker, political-science professor at Rutgers University.

If Bush repeatedly vetoes, Republicans concerned about the issue hurting them in the 2008 election could start voting in favor of an override, Baker said.

But Bush also could use the issue to "accuse Democrats of playing games," Mann said.

Sway on voters unclear

How much the issue influences voters isn't clear.

In 2006, five senators who had voted against the stem-cell bill lost their seats. Senators who supported federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research replaced four of those senators. But there were many other issues in all of those races.

In Missouri, voters in polls said they cared about stem-cell research, although it was never the No. 1 issue, said Richard Martin, campaign manager for Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., who defeated Republican Jim Talent. That makes it hard to determine how much impact it has, he said.

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