



*Week of 6-27-16
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Congressional Overview

The House is not in session this week, but the Senate debated Puerto Rico's finances and the Zika virus.

Congress Sends Puerto Rico Relief Bill to the President's Desk

With no time to spare, Congress passed legislation to aid Puerto Rico. The House passed its bill on June 9, and the Senate passed the legislation Wednesday evening, two days before the territory would face a default on \$2 billion of debt payments. The bill will allow Puerto Rico to restructure its debt load and establish an outside control board to police the territory's finances. President Obama is expected to sign the bill.

Zika Funding Stalled in Senate

Zika funding efforts were stalled in the Senate this week when Democrats blocked the House-passed bill that would have provided \$1.1 billion in funding to combat the virus. Both parties agree that the virus is a clear and increasing health crisis, and not surprisingly, both parties blame the other for Congress' failure to pass funding. Democrats argue that the House-passed bill was not a bipartisan compromise and had too many unacceptable riders (including limiting Planned Parenthood funding and loosening the EPA's Clean Water Act), and they also objected to the bill being paid for by cuts to Ebola funding. Republicans slammed Senate Democrats for voting down the house-passed bill, stating that the Democrats are standing in the way of funding they have claimed to want for months.

There will be no action taken on Zika funding before Congress breaks for its July 4 recess, and top U.S. health officials warn that advance trials for a Zika vaccine will be hindered, or even stopped, if Congress does not approve more funding soon. Senate Republicans are ignoring the Democrats' demand to renegotiate and develop a bipartisan compromise and have indicated that the Senate will hold another vote on the same measure following the July 4 recess.

Supreme Court Ruling Makes it Harder to Prosecute Public Officials

On Monday, the Supreme Court made it harder to prosecute public officials for corruption with the Justices unanimously vacating the conviction against Bob McDonnell, a former governor of Virginia. McDonnell was charged with using his office to help Jonnie R. Williams, Sr., who had provided the McDonnells with luxury products, loans and vacations worth more than \$175,000 when McDonnell was governor. The gifts themselves were legal, and the question in the case was whether they were part of a corrupt bargain in which McDonnell reciprocated by using the power of his office to help Williams.

FDA Launches New Oncology Center

On Tuesday, Vice President Joe Biden announced the creation of a new center at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to align individuals with expertise in oncology; the announcement was part of the "cancer moonshot" initiative. FDA Commissioner Robert Califf previously said his agency would move forward to establish a largely virtual Oncology Center of Excellence. That center will no longer be virtual, but rather an office in charge of leading the oncology center to coordinate activities with a specific individual in charge.

The switch was made, they say, after cancer advocates pressed Califf to give the effort more authority. It is still unclear how the new center will be funded and President Obama's FY 17 budget request included \$75 million as part of the moonshot program to establish the center. The goal of creating a center is to promote collaboration within the agency with FDA's hope to tap into disease-specific knowledge of regulatory scientists and reviewers.

Senate Committee Approves Package to Boost Science and Research Spending

The Senate Commerce committee voted Wednesday to pass a bipartisan package to boost basic science by reforming programs within the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Federal Judge Strikes Down Interior Department's Regulation on Hydraulic Fracturing

On Tuesday, June 21, Judge Scott Skavdahl of the District Court of Wyoming struck down the Interior Department's effort to regulate hydraulic fracturing for oil and natural gas. Judge Skavdahl already had put a hold on the regulations last year, and in his latest decision, he ruled that Congress did not give Interior the power to regulate hydraulic fracturing. "Congress has not delegated to the Department of Interior the authority to regulate hydraulic fracturing," he wrote in deciding a lawsuit brought by industry groups and a number of Western states. The "effort to do so through the Fracking Rule is in excess of its statutory authority and contrary to law."

The judge dismissed the claim by the Interior Department and its Bureau of Land Management that it had inherent broad regulatory authority to pursue the public good on federal and Indian lands, the only place the regulations would have applied. "Congress' inability or unwillingness to pass a law desired by the executive branch does not default authority to the executive branch to act independently, regardless of whether hydraulic fracturing is good or bad for the environment or the citizens of the United States," wrote Judge Skavdahl.