

GOP Senators' Fight Holding Up Drug, Pandemic Bills (Corrected)

By Shira Stein | November 29, 2018 7:54PM ET

Two Republican senators are blocking health-care legislation each had hoped to pass in the end-of-year lame duck session of Congress, in an unusual intraparty feud.

Sens. [Richard Burr](#) (R-N.C.) and [Johnny Isakson](#) (R-Ga.) have placed holds on each other's bills and are in a standoff that might result in neither bill being passed.

Burr is the main sponsor of the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act (PAHPA) ([S. 2852](#)), which would reauthorize programs to protect the nation from pandemics and bioterrorist attacks. Isakson is the sponsor of the Over-the-Counter Drug Safety, Innovation, and Reform Act ([S. 2315](#)), which would modify the regulatory framework for nonprescription drugs and establish user fees for drugmakers.

The fight started with Burr putting a hold on the bill, Isakson told Bloomberg Government in an interview, which led to Isakson then putting a hold on Burr's bill. "I finally put a hold on his bill, just to get him to sit down and talk to me," Isakson said. A hold is a procedural courtesy available to senators who wish to delay floor action on a bill until their concerns have been dealt with.



Photo - Alex Wong/Getty Images
U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) is seen at the Capitol September 28, 2016 in Washington, D.C.

House Democrats also have some concerns about the pandemic reauthorization bill.

“We’re talking with both senators and House members to see how we can get a solution. It’s just the usual end-of-the-year negotiations,” Sen. [Lamar Alexander](#) (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee, said in an interview. “We very much hope they pass by the end of the year. We don’t want them going next year. So, hopefully, the senators will agree to let them pass,”

Trying to Work it Out

Isakson said he has talked with Burr three times, but they haven’t been able to work out their differences.

Burr has a hold on Isakson’s OTC drug bill because he is frustrated about the Food and Drug Administration’s proposed regulation to ban most electronic cigarette flavors, according to a Republican health-care lobbyist speaking on condition of anonymity.

Isakson said he doesn’t plan to remove his hold until Burr removes his. “It’s going to stay there until he lets the other one go. It’s not right to use the rules of the Senate the way he’s using them,” he said.

Isakson said Burr told him the pandemic reauthorization would be done by the end of the year, but Isakson said he doesn't know that will happen. The program authorization expired Sept. 30, but were funded through the Health and Human Services Department fiscal 2019 appropriations bill.

Burr's office declined to comment for this story.

Problems in the House

Both bills have passed in the House—the pandemic reauthorization bill in September and the over-the-counter drug bill in July—but there are differences that need to be worked out between the House and Senate.

Rep. [Frank Pallone](#) (D-N.J.), who is in line to lead the Energy and Commerce Committee in the next Congress, has some issues with some minor things in the pandemic bill, the lobbyist said. The Senate HELP committee is trying to work out those issues with Pallone, a House Republican aide said.

The pandemic reauthorization bill “remains a priority for Democratic members of the House. We passed a bill with unanimous support and the Senate hasn't passed a bill yet,” C.J. Young, press secretary for the House Energy and Commerce Democrats, said in a statement.

“There are a lot of people trying to work it out,” Isakson said about the issues with the two bills, adding those with issues with Burr's bill should be the ones to work it out. “Y'all go solve your problems and don't hold mine up,” he said.

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