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## **Bill to expand funding for stem-cell work gains support**

By [Patrick O'Connor](#)

A controversial bill to hike funding for stem-cell research is gaining momentum in the House, increasing the chances that it will be the first bill President Bush vetoes.

The bill, sponsored by Reps. Mike Castle (R-Del.) and Diana DeGette (D-Colo.), has 186 co-sponsors, including 20 Republicans, and a Democratic aide tracking the bill predicted the legislation will eventually secure a majority of the House. Most of those votes are expected to come from House Democrats.

Because a Senate version of the bill already has 58 co-sponsors, many political observers expect the bill to reach the president's desk if it clears the House.

Controversy surrounding the legislation erupted almost two weeks ago after a Washington Post report that House leadership had promised Castle a vote on the bill, which social conservatives adamantly oppose. Castle mobilized centrists to secure the promise from House GOP leaders in exchange for their votes on the House budget resolution.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) later maintained that the House would not vote on the Castle-DeGette bill as it is written, but a number of people with direct knowledge of the deal said the eventual legislation would "maintain the spirit" of it.

House conservatives were caught off guard by the deal when it was first reported and have vowed to fight the legislation on its way to the House floor.

"Leadership made a bad deal, and a lot of people are angry about it," said Rep. Joe Pitts (R-Pa.), chairman of the House Values Action Team, which is aligned with the Republican Study Committee in opposition to the bill. "This vote only offers the left another opportunity to demagogue this issue by spreading outrageous mistruths."

Describing the bill as "a will of the House" vote, leadership has also decided not to whip the bill, said one GOP leadership aide, encouraging members "to vote their conscience" on the issue. This move is likely to rile conservatives further.

It is too early to tell if a stem-cell bill will pass the House because leadership has not decided on the specifics of the legislation, but it promises to be a tight vote that could imperil Hastert's desire to pass legislation that does not attract "a majority of the majority." Hastert used that phrase when he opted not to have the House vote on a pending intelligence reform bill because it had not attracted enough support among House Republicans.

Social conservative groups are already lining up to defeat whatever legislation reaches

the floor and vowed to pressure anti-abortion-rights members on both sides of the aisle.

The Christian Coalition will begin pressuring members in the next two to three weeks, said Jim Backlin, the group's vice president of legislative affairs. He predicted this would be a tight vote but expected the Coalition and other conservative organizations to garner the 230 to 235 votes they have received on other close votes.

Conservative allies of House leadership were concerned about the prospect for a floor vote on stem-cell research just as they are gearing up for a fight on Bush's judicial appointments.

"If what I'm hearing is true, I'm very concerned," said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council. "It makes no sense politically."

The vote comes at a difficult time for social conservatives, Perkins said, because it distracts attention from the judicial fight.

Perkins said he was expecting to discuss the Castle deal with leadership late yesterday afternoon but did not see much potential for compromise.

"The president has made his position very clear, and we support the president's position," Perkins said. "I see no reason for the president to change his stand."

If the House and Senate pass the measure, the only way it would not be sent to Bush is if GOP leaders refused to reach an agreement during House-Senate negotiations on merging the legislation.

The bill seeks to expand funding for stem-cell research beyond those stem cells that had been created before August 2001, when Bush announced that the federal government would no longer fund research on any new lines.

The Castle-DeGette bill limits that funding to stem-cell lines created from excess embryos that have been donated by in vitro fertilization clinics with the written consent of the donor. The bill does not seek funding for any embryos that are created for research alone.

Even with those limits, conservative critics condemn the practice because human embryos are destroyed in the process. Conservatives instead favor research and treatments conducted with adult stem cells, which can be produced from most bodily tissues, such as fat, bone marrow and umbilical-cord blood.

Although adult stem cells have already been used in a number of successful treatments, researchers are divided about their versatility and have largely concluded that embryonic stem cells have more research applications because they can grow into any other kind of cell. In addition, advocates for stem-cell research argue that embryonic stem cells could someday be used to repair organ damage and spinal-cord injuries.

A vote on the expansion bill was supposed to occur some time before the July 4 recess.

The Castle-DeGette bill was referred to the Energy and Commerce Committee after its introduction Feb. 15, but the committee has not yet scheduled a hearing or markup on it.

“We don’t have any plans at this time to look at the legislation,” said Kevin Schweers, a spokesman for the committee.