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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE NEW

The House and Senate did not meet today.

When the Senate reconvenes on Monday, March 26, the leadership will hold a cloture vote on S. 2204, the Repeal Big Oil Tax Subsidies Act. If the Senate fails to invoke cloture on that measure, it will move to a cloture vote on S. 1789, the postal reform bill.

The House also will return to session on March 26, but no legislative program has been announced. As discussed below, Politico reports that the House is expected to take up and approve its FY13 budget resolution.

BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS

HOUSE REPUBLICAN FY13 BUDGET WOULD CUT DOMESTIC SPENDING, PROTECT DEFENSE UPDATED

The FY13 budget introduced on March 20 by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI) proposes to cut spending significantly on a wide variety of domestic discretionary and entitlement programs, while protecting defense spending. The measure, which was approved by the House Budget Committee on March 21 by a vote of 19-18, also calls for revamping Medicare and Medicaid, repealing health care reform, and overhauling the tax code.

The House is expected to consider and approve the measure next week, reports Politico.

As indicated by earlier news reports, the House budget resolution would set FY13 discretionary spending about $19 billion below the $1.047 trillion level approved with bipartisan support in last year’s Budget Control Act (BCA), with added funding for defense and cuts in domestic
spending. As reported by CQ.com, the budget plan would set defense discretionary spending at $554 billion, or about $8 billion above the BCA level. Domestic discretionary spending would be set at $474 billion, or about $27 billion below the BCA level, says the publication.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-KY) told The Hill that he had hoped the discretionary spending level in the House budget resolution would be higher, but he added, “It’s a workable number. We’ll make it work.”

Meanwhile, Senate Democratic leaders are sticking with the BCA discretionary spending level of $1.047 trillion. As required by the BCA, Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-ND) filed a “deeming” resolution on March 20, which sets discretionary spending for FY13 at that level and enables Senate appropriators to begin moving their FY13 funding bills.

The House budget summary is unclear about how the budget treats Pell Grants. The document says that the budget would place Pell on a sustainable path by limiting growth of financial aid and focusing it on low-income students who need it most (pages 43-44). Also unclear is what the summary means when it says that the budget would consolidate job-training programs into career scholarships.

Presumably, cuts in domestic discretionary spending would translate into cuts in research programs, but the energy section of the budget summary (page 30) says:

“This budget would continue funding essential government missions, including energy security and basic research and development, while paring back duplicative spending and non-core functions, such as applied and commercial research or development projects best left to the private sector.”

HOUSE LETTER ON FY13 NIH FUNDING INCLUDES 153 SIGNATORIES

A group of 153 Members of the House, including nine Republicans, sent a letter to House appropriators on March 20 urging them to fund the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at $32 billion in FY13, an increase of 4.5 percent. “We feel this level is absolutely vital in order for NIH to continue improving health through medical science breakthroughs and to maintain international leadership in science and biomedical research,” said the Members. The letter was spearheaded by Reps. Brian Bilbray (R-CA) and Edward Markey (D-MA).

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

HHS RELEASES FINAL RULES ON STUDENT HEALTH PLANS

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has published the final rules on student health plans under the Affordable Care Act, the health care reform bill signed into law in 2010. The Department issued the final rules on March 16 and published them in the Federal Register on March 21.

A group of higher education associations, including AAU, sent a letter to HHS and the White House on March 2, requesting that the Department either immediately issue the final version of
the proposed rules, originally published in February, 2011, or announce a delay in their implementation until the 2013-14 academic year. The associations said the delay was causing problems for some campuses in their contract negotiations for student health insurance coverage for the 2012-13 academic year.

As reported by the American Council on Education, major provisions include:

- Benefit caps can be no lower than $100,000 in the 2012-13 academic year and $500,000 in the 2013-14 academic year. After 2013-14, the cap will be eliminated completely.
- The medical loss ratio (the percentage of premiums that must be spent on health care programs and quality improvement) must be at least 70 percent in 2013 and 80 percent thereafter.
- The final rule notes that self-funded student health plans cannot be included in this regulation without a change in law. Additionally, the final rule clarifies that the student health plans of nonprofit religious institutions of higher education qualify for a one-year transition to the new contraceptive coverage requirement, similar to nonprofit employers.

End of document