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## As Florida leads nation with Zika virus, a funding fight breaks out in Washington



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WASHINGTON — A Zika war has broken out on Capitol Hill.

Democrats and Republicans are escalating a fight over a \$1.9 billion request from President Barack Obama to combat a growing threat most pronounced in Florida.

"If this is not an emergency, there's nothing that is," Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada said Wednesday during a news conference, flanked by other Democrats, including Florida Sen. Bill Nelson. "No flood, no earthquake, no fire, nothing would be an emergency if this isn't."

But Republicans are divided, with many questioning the size and urgency of the funding request. Obama has already secured \$589 million, much of it taken from an account set aside for Ebola.

"We haven't concluded how much or when," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., told reporters on Tuesday. "We all are very much aware that this is a serious crisis."

House leaders were even more circumspect and say they want the funding dealt with not as a standalone issue but as part of the normal appropriations process. They also want budget offsets.

As of Wednesday, there were 94 reported cases in Florida, according to the state health department, more than any other state. Of those, five involve pregnant women. All the cases are travel related.

Only days ago, there appeared to be movement on the funding.

Sen. Roy Blunt, the Missouri Republican who chairs the Senate Appropriations health subcommittee, had been working on a deal with Democrats that last sat at \$1.1 billion.

But Reid rejected anything less than the full amount and demanded the issue be dealt with by Friday, before the House and Senate take a week off.

"No wonder people have the frustration they have when we cannot even honor our responsibilities with such an apparent threat to the public health of our country," fumed California Rep. Nancy Pelosi, who attended the news conference Wednesday.

Nelson reiterated that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on April 11 called Zika "scarier than we initially thought" and now is "all the more petrified."

"Go to the southeast of Miami, go down to Puerto Rico, and what you find is an estimate that there may be as many as 20 percent of the population that is infected," said Nelson, who introduced legislation for the full \$1.9 billion.

Reluctance from House Republicans can be viewed through the Florida delegation, which has not been particularly vocal about the need for more funding.

"If more funds are needed, the administration should come to Congress and demonstrate how the funds will be used," Rep. Ron DeSantis of Ponte Vedra Beach said recently.

The White House says it issued guidance two months ago on how the money would be used.

Heritage Action, the influential conservative group, is pressing Republicans not to grant the request without budget offsets.

Not all Republicans oppose the funding. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida favors \$1.9 billion, though he said Tuesday that he is "generally supportive of that request" and also wants offsets.

"What we don't want to do is wake up one morning to the realization that you're now in the middle of summer, this has become an epidemic or catastrophe and we didn't do anything on the front end, and everyone here's going to have to explain, 'You know, what was your position at the time?'

"But I also think you can be for Zika funding, you can even be for Zika funding at \$1.9 billion and you can also ask questions about, 'How is this money going to be spent?' And if possible, 'How are we going to pay for it?' Because we are facing a debt situation in this country, and I believe we can find \$1.9 billion to pay for it."

Florida Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, organized an event with bay area health officials Tuesday to call attention to the virus. She charged that "Republican inaction leaves us more susceptible to this serious public health emergency."

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