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Abortion resurfaces as hot topic on Capitol Hill

By Jim Snyder and Silla Brush - 11/30/09 07:58 PM ET

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Abortion-rights groups are holding a lobby day on Wednesday to fight language in the House healthcare bill that would impose greater restrictions on access to the controversial procedure.

The amendment by Rep. Bart Stupak (D-Mich.), adopted before House passage on Nov. 21, would prohibit women who receive government subsidies for healthcare from purchasing insurance that covers abortions, and it would prohibit coverage of the procedure in government-run health plans.

A Senate healthcare bill backed by Democratic leaders is less restrictive, although the language is expected to come up during the floor debate that begins this week.

Abortion-rights groups Planned Parenthood, NARAL-Pro-Choice America and others are sponsoring a lobby day on Wednesday as part of a national "week of action" in opposition to the Stupak language. The lobby day is expected to draw around 500 abortion-rights advocates to rally in the Dirksen Senate Office Building and door-knock on Capitol Hill, said Tait Sye, a spokesman for Planned Parenthood.

"It has certainly struck a nerve," Sye said of the Stupak amendment. Planned Parenthood has had more than 70,000 people sign a petition in opposition to the language. NARAL delivered a similar petition to Capitol Hill with more than 90,000 signatures.

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Each side of the issue, which has re-emerged as a hot topic in Congress, has been rallying its grassroots network in preparation for the Senate fight. The National Right to Life group, which opposes abortion rights, has created www.stoptheabortionagenda.com to activate its supporters.

The Center for Reproductive Rights has sponsored an advertising campaign against the Stupak amendment, and other abortion-rights groups have used social media to reach out to their members and seek new support.

Shelby wants 'living wills'

Sen. Richard Shelby (Ala.), the Senate Banking Committee's top Republican, says the government should require large financial firms to have the equivalent of "living wills" and beef up the bankruptcy process to avoid future bailouts.

Shelby, who opposed the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout, said at the Oxford Union on Monday that the government should create a "nimble resolution regime" akin to bankruptcy proceedings to deal with failing firms that threaten the financial industry as a whole. The Senate Banking Committee is in the early stages of debating wide-ranging financial legislation, and the issue of firms that are "too big to fail" remains one of the thorniest matters for lawmakers.

Chairman Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) released a draft bill earlier in November, but he is still working on the broad outlines of the measure with Democrats and Republicans.

The Obama administration backs creating a new policy to wind down firms through a government-run fund financed through assessments on financial firms. Republicans have consistently criticized that proposal as perpetuating government bailouts.

The administration defends the idea as a way for future administrations to dissolve big firms without having to turn to Congress in emergency situations for bailout money.

Shelby said on Monday that "it is time to reverse the trend of increasing government bailouts and return to market discipline and due diligence by investors."

Shelby said that large firms should keep "living wills" on how they would deal with future crises and that the government should consider promoting "contingent capital," debt that can be turned into equity.

Shelby said a "nimble" resolution system should be similar to bankruptcy proceedings and may need to provide rapid access to liquidity.



Bernanke, Geithner to testify

There's plenty else to interest the financial-services lobby this week on Capitol Hill.

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke will appear before the Senate Banking Committee on Thursday for a confirmation hearing for a second term as head of the central bank.

Lawmakers across Capitol Hill have been increasingly critical of the Fed, even as they appear supportive of Bernanke. The House Financial Services Committee, with Republican and Democratic support, voted to back a new audit of the Federal Reserve that would subject the bank to heightened scrutiny.

Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas) has fought unsuccessfully for decades for additional oversight of the Fed, but he has gained support among colleagues since the financial crisis raised questions about the Fed and its broad powers. Rep. Alan Grayson (D-Fla.) joined Paul on the audit amendment, which was adopted over the objections of powerful Chairman Barney Frank (D-Mass.).

Sen. Dodd has said he supports Bernanke's confirmation, but the hearing will be watched closely as a way to judge Bernanke's power and persuasion on Capitol Hill.

Bernanke is likely to be asked about an opinion article he wrote for The Washington Post in which he assailed regulatory reform proposals in the Senate and the House as a threat to economic stability.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner will testify on the need for new curbs on the multitrillion-dollar derivatives market. During his last hearing before lawmakers, Geithner was sharply criticized by House Republicans. Rep. Kevin Brady (R-Texas) called on Geithner to resign, which set off a fiery exchange in the hearing room.

General Motors hires lobbyist

After a hiatus, General Motors is back hiring outside help to lobby Congress and the administration. The troubled automaker once ran one of the most effective lobbying operations in town. But it terminated its contracts with outside consultants last year when the downturn hit GM, eventually sending the iconic American company into bankruptcy.

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In the first three quarters of 2008, GM had spent nearly \$10 million on lobbying with at least 16 firms at various times. GM has spent around \$7 million on its own in-house advocacy group so far this year.

But recently Greenberg Traurig re-emerged in federal lobbying registrations as representing GM. The firm is lobbying on an effort by China to impose duties on American car exports. The lobbying team includes James Bacchus, a former Democratic congressman from Florida, and Ira Shapiro, a former general counsel to the United States Trade Representative.

Is GM, which has emerged from bankruptcy, revving up its lobbying operation?

“To paraphrase Freud, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” said GM spokesman Greg Martin. “From time to time we will lobby on specific issues,” he said. But the company’s lobbying operation will continue to be more modest than it once was.

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