

THE GOVERNMENT

Under Pressure, House GOP Adds

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As House Republicans came under mounting pressure yesterday from government contractors, lobbyists and irate federal workers, the list of agencies and activities that they were willing to fund through next September just kept growing.

With veteran lawmakers clamoring for favored programs to be protected from future government closures, GOP leaders introduced a bill extending full-year funding to the National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Gallaudet elementary and high school programs, Medicare contractors, Medicaid payments to the states and many other federal activities.

Late yesterday, the House voted 344 to 24 to approve the legislation, which followed House approval earlier in the same day of a far more limited list. The Senate passed the measure late last night by a voice vote. President Clinton said he will sign the bill.

By assuring funding through the end of the current fiscal year, the legislation would remove much of the political pressure that has been building on Republicans to reopen the government. While the programs would be subject to limits set in various stalled appropriations bills, and in some cases would be well below that of 1995, the funding would be guaranteed.

Not covered are many activities and programs supported by the Clinton administration, such as the Head Start preschool program, job training, environmental protection and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

However, the legislation also would not protect NASA, which traditionally has enjoyed strong

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SHUTDOWN

to List of Protected

Activities

Republican support, especially in the GOP's Sun Belt political base.

"We were trying to single out programs that are in dire straits," said Elizabeth Morra, spokeswoman for the House Appropriations Committee.

House Republicans, who started out with a sharply limited goal of restoring back pay for federal workers and sending them temporarily back to work, soon found themselves giving ground.

Early yesterday, they introduced and passed on the House floor a bill that would finance through Sep-

tember "meals on wheels" for the elderly; child welfare programs; aid to native Americans; railroad pensions; veterans benefits; and visa and passport services abroad. It also would reopen the national parks, the National Gallery and the Smithsonian Museum. That bill moved through Congress.

But as the day wore on, pressures mounted to expand the list, especially from federal contrac-

tors, which have been blocked from receiving new funding since mid-December, when the partial shutdown began.

The Information Technology Association of America, which has 6,700 members that sell computers and software to federal agencies, called the first GOP bill "outrageous." Edward H. Bersoff, president of BTG Inc. and chairman of the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce, said the efforts by the House leadership amounted to "subterfuge."

Gary Engebretson, president of the 220-member Contract Services Association of America, termed the decision to provide back pay to furloughed federal workers, but not to reimburse thousands of contract employees who have been laid off, "an outrage that results in private-sector employees being left out in the cold."

Last night, the House Appropriations Committee agreed to include in a new "back to work bill" 17 categories of new activities that would be funded through Sept. 30, the end of the current fiscal year.

Included was relief for contractors handling Medicare claims. The health insurance industry has been spending between \$25 million and \$30 million a week of its own money to process the claims and channel payments to doctors, hospitals and patients.

At the same time, the Republicans addressed the concerns of federal judicial authorities by pro-

viding full-year funding for payments to private contractors who provide courthouse security.

Relief for home buyers and the mortgage industry was provided in the form of full-year funding for Federal Housing Administration loan processing activities.

And concerns that clinical trials of experimental drugs for AIDS and cancer sufferers might have to be interrupted appeared to have been alleviated by the decision to provide guaranteed funding for the National Institutes of Health.

Throughout the day, House Ap-

ropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.) served as judge and mediator, as members made pleas for other federal activities to be funded through the end of the fiscal year.

The limited reopening of the government that Congress agreed to yesterday will allow many other stalled activities to resume at something like a normal pace.

When federal workers go back to their offices after the 23-day shutdown, they will have at least limited leeway to perform their regular duties, dealing with administrative matters, issuing licenses, writing regulations and inspecting businesses, according to the Clinton administration's interpretation of the legislation.

But new funding for thousands of federal contractors will remain blocked. With some major exceptions laid out in the GOP legislation introduced yesterday, the nine departments and dozens of agencies for which there is still no annual appropriation will be barred from entering into new contracts.

For agencies such as NASA, which relies heavily on outside contractors, this means continued uncertainty and confusion. Although NASA has adequate funding to launch a new shuttle mission Thursday—and to bring it back to earth—the program will run out of money the week of Jan. 22.

With the agency barred from issuing new contracts or spending money other than that approved by previous Congresses, NASA also could be forced to stop work on the space station later this month. Such an action could ripple out to hundreds of companies, and eventually to the paychecks of thou-

sands of their employees.

Clinton administration officials underlined the uneven impact of the Republican plan.

"If you're a people-intensive agency you'll be hampered but you'll be able to basically function, but if you're a big contracting agency you'll continue to be substantially shut down," said John A. Koskinen, deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Republican action in Congress, while sending most federal workers back to their jobs and protecting some activities from another shutdown in a few weeks, still leaves many normal federal activities in jeopardy, according to administration sources.

By shifting funds, and improvising, many agencies have been able

to make do during the shutdown, but many government departments appeared to be nearing the breaking point in recent days.

For the first time since the Labor Department began issuing employment numbers in the 1950s, the government yesterday was forced to postpone release of the monthly figures because of the budget shutdown.

The Labor Department was able to get full-year funding for two other high-priority programs—black lung medical benefits and trade adjustment assistance for dislocated workers—in the GOP measure, but the House did not include the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Although BLS employees "mash the numbers," much of the data collection in the field for the unemployment and consumer price reports is collected by contract employees. Without specific spending authority, BLS would not be able to pay contractors to collect data and could be forced to skip the January reports.

At the National Science Foundation, officials said yesterday that they might have to bring home all but a caretaker crew from the base camps of the U.S. Antarctic scientific mission, resulting in the cancellation of the science program due to start in March, unless there is new funding.

At NASA, officials said the prolonged budget impasse threatens to drive up the cost of programs such as the planned construction of an international space station by forcing contractor layoffs, launch delays and disruptions in a compli-

cated network of international commitments.

"This is amazing," said Chris Christensen, manager of NASA's Furlough Operations Center at headquarters here. "We're going to continue the way we are now, except we'll have a lot of civil servants around . . . without the authority to get anything done."

NASA yesterday directed its contractor-operated Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena to begin preparing a contingency plan that could lead to a reduction in personnel. Under its federal contract,

JPL's employees cannot be furloughed like their colleagues who work directly for the government, and they have worked through the shutdown.

Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.), whose Appropriations subcommittee controls funding for NASA, said late yesterday that he was still looking into the possibility of getting some relief for the space agency.

Staff writers David Brown, Toni Locy, Bill McAllister, Thomas Lippman and Kathy Sawyer contributed to this report.