

Republicans Push Through Mining Deregulation Bill

LARRY MARGASAK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans pushed a bill through the House Thursday that allows the government to exempt gold, copper, silver and uranium mining on federal land from formal environmental reviews.

The bill makes it harder for opponents to mount legal challenges against new ventures.

The legislation, approved on a 256-160 vote, was the latest in the GOP-led House to favor industry and oppose strict government regulations. Supporters praised its goal of creating jobs.

Like other deregulation bills, it will likely die in the Democratic-run Senate. Opponents said the bill would be an industry giveaway and an environmental disaster. The Obama administration said it would "undermine and remove" environmental safeguards.

The bill would give the federal government discretion to eliminate its environmental reviews of mining projects and accept state reviews instead. It would curtail the time for environmental reviews by limiting the review period to 30 months unless mining companies and the government agreed to an extension.

It would also set a 60-day time limit to file a legal challenge to a mining project, limit injunctions to what is necessary to correct legal requirements and prohibit payment of attorneys' fees, expenses and other costs billed to taxpayers.

The 234 Republicans voting for the bill were joined by 22 Democrats, while all the votes against were by Democrats.

Both parties agreed on one objective of the legislation: The U.S. should be allowed to compete with China to mine so-called rare earth metals — specific minerals used in devices that people use every day, such as computer memory, DVDs, rechargeable batteries, cellphones, car catalytic converters, magnets and fluorescent lighting.

China is by far the world's largest producer of rare earth minerals. But in June, China's cabinet issued a paper saying that poor regulation of mining there had caused widespread environmental damage.

In the U.S., there has also been evidence of environmental damage. The process not only disturbs land, uncovering naturally radioactive materials and toxic metals in rock and soil, but the chemicals and compounds used to refine the minerals can

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also cause contamination.

Rep. Doc Hastings, chairman of the Natural Resources Committee, said the bill would create jobs, end duplicative reviews, stop frivolous lawsuits and prevent regulations that hold up new mining projects for more than a decade.

"First and foremost, this is a jobs bill, and the positive economic impact of this bill's intent will extend beyond the mining industry," said Hastings, R-Wash.

Democrats mocked the title of the bill, the "National Strategic and Critical Minerals Production Act." They said it would go far beyond encouraging production of strategic materials by giving a break to companies mining everyday products like sand and gravel.

The Republican majority "actually appears to be trying to usher in a new stone age," said Rep. Edward Markey, an opponent. The Massachusetts Democrat added, "Under this bill, the next time you go to the beach, you should put some sand in your pocket, because the majority apparently believes that it is a rare element. That gravel in your driveway? Protected because under this bill it is apparently strategic to America's national security."

He called the bill "a pretext for gutting environmental protections relating to virtually all mining operations" and "a GOP giveaway game show here on the House floor."

Rep. Rush Holt, D-N.J., also mocked the bill's title.

"It has almost nothing to do with national strategic critical minerals production," he said.

"Make no mistake, this is a giveaway," Hold said. "It is free mining, no royalties, no protection of public interest, exemption from royalty payments, near exemption from environmental regulations, near exemption from legal enforcement of the protections."

The bill's author, Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., said, "The giveaway stuff is phenomenally entertaining. This does nothing to tax law. This does nothing to safety law. This does nothing to ... supplant" environmental law.

He accused opponents of saying, "We are basically against an industry."

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