House Approves Bill To Speed Mining On Federal Land

Matthew Daly, AP

Republicans in the House pushed through a bill Wednesday to speed up government review of gold, copper, silver and uranium mining on federal land. The bill makes it harder for opponents to mount legal challenges against new ventures and sets a 30-month timeline for environmental reviews. Supporters said the bill would help create jobs by cutting back waiting periods for new "hard-rock" mining projects that can stretch up to 10 years. The bill would give U.S. officials discretion to waive federal environmental reviews and accept state reviews instead. It also sets a 60-day limit to file legal challenges.

Opponents called the bill a giveaway to the mining industry and an environmental disaster. The House approved the bill, 246-178. Fifteen Democrats supported the bill. No Republicans opposed it. The measure is expected to die in the Democratic-run Senate. The White House issued a statement opposing the bill, saying it would "undermine and remove" important environmental safeguards. The legislation also undermines laws requiring multiple uses of public lands by placing mining interests above all other uses, the White House said, calling the measure a threat to hunting, fishing, recreation and other activities that create jobs and sustain local economies across the country.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., said it was needed to end permitting delays that rank the United States below most other countries in approving new mining projects. "Duplicative regulations, bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of coordination between federal agencies are threatening the economic recovery of my home state and jeopardizing our national security," said Amodei, a former president of the Nevada Mining Association. While Nevada is rich in strategic and critical minerals, it also has the nation's highest unemployment rate, Amodei said. "Decade-long permitting delays are standing in the way of high-paying jobs and revenue for local communities," he said.

But Rep. Rush Holt, D-N.J., called the bill a giveaway to the mining industry, which wields outsize political influence in Nevada and other Western states. "This bill is not about fixing delays," Holt said, "but really is about preventing proper environmental review." Holt and other Democrats said the Obama administration has moved to approve mining permits more quickly than the Bush administration, noting that 82 percent of mining plans are approved within three years. Projects that need more than three years of review tend to be larger and more complex and pose more risks to the environment, Holt and other Democrats said.

Democrats also complained that while the U.S. government reaps billions of dollars in royalties each year from fossil fuels extracted from federal lands and waters, it does not collect any money from gold, uranium or other metals mined from the

same places. The government doesn't even know how much these so-called hard-rock mines produce from federal public lands in the 12 Western states where most of the mining occurs, according to a report by the Government Accountability Office. Instead of streamlining permits, Congress should move to impose royalties on hard-rock mining, Democrats said.

"I think it's just a shame that we just keep giving everything away," Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., said.

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