

FAIRBANKS DAILY NEWS MINER:

Party politics could stall Alaska oil drilling talks

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WASHINGTON — Congress returns to Capitol Hill this week with a full plate of issues and little time to digest them.

Lawmakers began trickling back to Washington on Monday prepared to take up the energy fight once again. They have roughly three weeks left in a pre-election session to hash out the expiring ban on offshore drilling, spending bills and, possibly, a second stimulus package.

The partisan atmosphere in the run-up to the November election threatens to turn the final days of the 110th Congress into a food fight, though.

The logjam remains energy. Republicans continue to insist on a vote to increase domestic oil production, but Democratic leaders have long ignored their calls.

The only must-pass legislation before lawmakers is a continuing budget resolution to keep the government operating after Oct. 1. But even that could become a battlefield.

Republicans are threatening to shut down the government for the first time in a decade if they aren't allowed a vote on drilling.

Republicans spent the August recess demanding a vote on opening the outer continental shelf in response to high gasoline prices.

About 130 House Republicans didn't even leave town last month. Instead, they staged a "speak-in" on the House floor to protest the fact that Democrats have not allowed an up-and-down vote on expanding offshore drilling.

The protest was aimed at pressuring House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., into allowing a vote to allow energy development in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans as well as parts of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Pelosi has indicated she's willing to open a limited area 100 miles off the eastern shore, but only with the appropriate environmental safeguards and rollbacks of tax cuts for oil companies. Democrats would dedicate the revenue generated by the bill to renewable energy development.

The package would also include an extension of tax breaks for wind, solar and other renewable sources of energy that are set to expire this year.

Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, and his Republican colleagues in the House criticized Pelosi for the limited scope of her proposal, which has not yet been fully unveiled.

Young said he expects little more than a lot of “finger pointing” during the next few weeks.

“We have to wake up that this should be a nonpartisan issue,” Young said. “We have to start producing energy, and that means all types of energy.”

Young is supporting a Republican energy package that includes drilling in the coastal plain of ANWR. The proposal also would invest heavily in renewable energy development.

Young said he’s concerned Congress will be lulled into a false sense that the energy crisis has passed because oil prices have dipped down to near the \$100-per-barrel mark.

“I say develop our fossil fuels now, wherever they are, so we’re prepared and not dependent on those countries that are not friendly to us,” he said.

House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, said Republicans want a “all of the above” approach to the energy crises that promotes energy conservation, renewable fuels and more drilling at home.

“Instead of giving the American people the energy bill they expect and deserve, it appears that Democrats will bring up another sham bill loaded up with tax hikes and failed energy policies that will raise gasoline prices further, not lower them,” Boehner said in a prepared statement.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., is expected to allow a vote on an energy package by a bipartisan group of lawmakers known as the “Gang of 10,” which would pair access to new offshore areas with investments in renewable energy and conservation.

Reid is expected to meet with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., this week to hash out details of bringing the legislation to the floor. The main sticking point is that Republicans will likely demand to be able to offer amendments.

Republicans are expected to hold the omnibus spending bill hostage to get the votes they want on drilling.