EDITORIAL: Bills masquerading as hurricane relief deserve defeat

LIKE MUSHROOMS APPEARING after a soaking rain, numerous bills have popped up in Congress in reaction to hurricanes inundating the Gulf Coast. Many are well-intentioned, but some clearly seek to capitalize on the crisis and shove through ideas that have been shot down before. Lawmakers should be wary of such impulsive legislation.

A time of national crisis is no time to set aside the deliberation that we expect from our lawmakers. In fact, it’s when skepticism should rule: Is this legislation really about helping the Gulf Coast, or are some lobbyists and their pet lawmakers trying to slide something through with a “Gulf relief” label slapped on it?

Here are a few of the proposals that should face skepticism on Capitol Hill:

- This is no time to be monkeying with the Endangered Species Act, which has a long record of success in protecting species and their threatened ecosystems from eradication. But some lawmakers are using the Gulf disaster to rush through a rewrite of the act to strip out some of the protections that have bothered property rights zealots — and big business — for years. The Species Act is a touchstone of American wilderness policy, and any changes to it deserve a full debate. These proposed changes were a poor idea before the storms, and have nothing to do with the damage to the Gulf Coast.

- Some in Congress would use the short-term gasoline problems related to Hurricane Katrina as cover to change the rules on air pollution. One proposal would write into law the Bush administration’s loosened enforcement of the Clean Air Act, while another would waive, perhaps permanently, restrictions on toxic ingredients in fuels or smog-causing pollutants. All this from a Congress that took more than four years to pass an energy bill, and an anemic one at that. Some of these measures were knocked out of that energy bill as compromises were made to push it through. At a time when even the Bush administration is starting to recognize global warming, there’s no reason to be loosening these emissions rules.

- The money flowing to the Gulf Coast has lobbyists across Washington hustling to get their clients in on the action — even if they were not significantly damaged by the storm. Airlines are seeking relief from their pension obligations — which they wanted before the storm — and high fuel costs. This would only add to the considerable federal aid given to the industry since 9/11. Other industry lobbies lining up include those for hospitals and farmers. Congress, if it is at all serious about its new pledges of budget restraint, is going to have to pick among them to find those few that deserve government help.

We’ve seen this kind of push for impulsive legislation before, of course. In the first days after 9/11, the Patriot Act was pushed through. Now, with some of its provisions up for renewal, there’s extensive debate taking place about the merits of some provisions — discussion lacking in the first days after the terrorist attacks.

There’s no need to be recklessly impulsive now, either. With the federal budget in such dire straits and so many vital costs pending for rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina’s damage, Congress needs to show some self-discipline for a change, and be prudent about many of these impulsive measures.