



PUBLIC LANDS: Tester sportsmen's bill teed up for Sunday vote

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

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A sweeping bill to boost hunting, angling and shooting opportunities on public lands is scheduled to see Senate action by Sunday, according to the chamber's second-ranking Democrat.

Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) told reporters this afternoon that leaders plan to hold a procedural vote on Sen. Jon Tester's S. 3525, the "Sportsmen's Act of 2012," as soon as they wrap up work on a six-month funding bill.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) filed cloture on Tester's bill this afternoon.

Passage of the sportsmen's bill could boost Tester's re-election bid against Rep. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.). The two are running neck and neck in Montana, a state rich in public lands that has one of the highest numbers of hunters per capita in the nation.

Republicans generally support the bill but have criticized Democratic leaders for calling a vote less than two months before the elections and before Congress tackles larger items including deficit reduction, expiring tax credits and sequestration.

"That may be true," Durbin said of the GOP opposition. "But they don't have a choice. We've filed the papers on the sportsman's bill. It will come up on Sunday."

The chamber must first pass a continuing resolution to keep the government funded through next March. Senators passed a procedural motion advancing the bill this afternoon, and final passage largely depends on how fast they can resolve Sen. Rand Paul's (R-Ky.) demand to hold a separate vote on whether to block foreign aid to Pakistan, Libya and Egypt.

While Tester's bill enjoys broad support from the National Rifle Association, Ducks Unlimited and the Wilderness Society, among others, it's unclear whether it would surmount the 60-vote threshold needed to pass.

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) today said she would oppose the bill because it would restrict U.S. EPA's ability to regulate lead bullets and fishing tackle. She said there may be a few other Democrats who would also oppose the bill but that she expects it to pass "overwhelmingly."

Durbin, too, would not say this afternoon whether he would vote for the bill. Tester's bill currently carries 11 Democratic co-sponsors.

Bill Snape, senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said Democrats are elevating Tester's re-election bid above the need to protect hunters and wildlife from the ill effects of lead poisoning.

"This provision is nothing but an irrational special interest favor for the NRA," he said. "No one is restricting their hunting. All we're saying is there are alternatives to lead, and lead kills."

CBD has filed a lawsuit in federal district court in Washington, D.C., to force EPA to regulate lead bullets, arguing safer and affordable alternatives are available.

Sportsmen's groups say there's no evidence that lead bullets have harmed wildlife populations and that alternatives would increase the cost to hunt.

Sen. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), whose bill, S. 1066, to allow the importation of polar bears legally harvested in Canada is included in the package, said he has not decided whether he would vote for Tester's measure.