Spending bill aids Great Lakes cleanup, MSU facility

Melissa Nann Burke, The Detroit News 10:16 p.m. EST December 16, 2015

Washington — The congressional year-end spending bill includes $300 million in federal funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and $100 million to continue building a facility for nuclear science at Michigan State University, officials said Wednesday.

The House is expected to vote this week on the spending package that was unveiled late Tuesday that would fund the federal government through September. The Senate would then vote next week.

Members of Michigan’s congressional delegation pushed to continue funding at the Great Lakes Restoration program at $300 million, the same level as recent years. The Obama administration has pushed for cuts in that funding level.

The spending bill also directs the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to expedite ongoing work and create emergency procedures to block Asian carp from entering Lake Michigan.

“From Asian carp to water contamination, these kind of robust, bipartisan commitments from Congress will help communities in Michigan combat the numerous threats that face our Great Lakes,” Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, said in a statement.

The MSU funding will support the next phase of the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams, which will provide intense beams of rare isotopes and enable scientists to study their properties.

“The Facility for Rare Isotope Beams will generate millions of dollars in economic activity for the Lansing area, create thousands of jobs and play a central role in training the next generation of nuclear physics researchers,” Sen. Gary Peters, ranking member of the Senate’s Space, Science and Competitiveness Subcommittee, said in a statement.

A proposal that would have taken gray wolves in the western Great Lakes region and Wyoming off the endangered list did not make it, an omission that surprised its backers but was welcomed Wednesday by groups that support maintaining federal protections for the predators.

U.S. Reps. Collin Peterson, D-Minnesota, Reid Ribble, R-Wisconsin, and some other lawmakers had hoped to attach a rider to return management of wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Wyoming to the states, which could have opened the door to a resumption of wolf hunting.

Peterson said budget negotiators dropped the provision from the final bill because the White House had threatened a veto if the bill contained any changes to the Endangered Species Act.

The combined wolf population in the western Great Lakes region is estimated at 3,700, including about 2,200 in Minnesota, while Wyoming has around 333.

“Cooler heads prevailed in Congress,” said Wayne Pacelle, CEO of the Humane Society of the United States. He said a letter written by Sens. Cory Booker, D-New Jersey, and Barbara Boxer, D-California, and signed by 23 other senators including Gary Peters, D-Michigan, helped make the difference.

Peterson, the ranking Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee, said supporters will have to regroup.

The omnibus spending bill also incorporates the language of legislation sponsored by Rep. Candice Miller, R-Harrison Township, to tighten security controls in the visa waiver program that lets citizens of 38 nations visit the United States for up to 90 days without a visa.

The House overwhelmingly approved Miller’s bill last week. Its provisions would increase data sharing with our partner countries participating in the program and require travelers who recently visited countries such as Iraq and Syria to obtain a visa before entering the U.S.

The omnibus package would repeal the U.S. country-of-origin labeling, or COOL, rules, for meat, following a ruling by a World Trade Organization arbitrator this month authorizing $1.01 billion in retaliatory tariffs on U.S. goods and products.

The WTO said Dec. 7 that Canada may impose $781 million in tariffs and Mexico, $227 million — a portion of which could affect Michigan goods and products. Canada and Mexico had fought the American COOL rules for years, arguing they discriminate against Canadian and Mexican hogs and cattle in violation of trade agreements.

The spending bill would repeal the mandatory labeling requirements for muscle cuts of beef and pork, as well as ground beef and pork.
“It is critical that we come together to resolve this issue so that our businesses do not face the cost of retaliation,” said Stabenow, ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee. “I’m pleased we’ve done that on a bipartisan basis.”

Associated Press contributed.

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