

Senate passes jobless benefits extension

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Andrew Taylor, The Associated Press

WASHINGTON – The [Senate](#) on Tuesday passed a \$10 billion measure to maintain unemployment benefits for the long-term jobless and provide stopgap funding for highway programs after a holdout Republican dropped stalling tactics that had generated a Washington firestorm.

Kentucky Republican Jim [Bunning](#) had been holding up action for days but conceded after pressure intensified with Monday's cutoff of road funding and extended unemployment benefits and health insurance subsidies for the jobless.

Bunning wanted to force [Democrats](#) to find ways to finance the bill so that it wouldn't add to the deficit, but his move sparked a political tempest that subjected [Republicans](#) to withering media coverage and could cost the party politically. Bunning's support among Republicans was dwindling, while Democrats – used to being on the defensive over health care and the deficit – seemed to relish the battle.

The bill passed by a 78-19 vote. It passed the House last week, and President [Barack Obama](#) was expected to sign the bill into law quickly so that 2,000 furloughed [Transportation Department](#) workers can go back to work today.

Doctors faced the prospect of a 21 percent cut in Medicare payments, and federal flood insurance programs had lapsed with Monday's expiration of an earlier stopgap bill that passed late last year.

Tuesday's action will provide a monthlong extension of the expired programs to give [Congress](#) time to pass a yearlong – and far more costly – fix that's also pending.

Without the legislation, about 200,000 jobless people would have lost federal benefits this week alone, according to the liberal-leaning National Employment Law Project. Jobless people normally get 26 weeks of unemployment benefits and 20 more weeks in states with higher unemployment rates. The legislation extends several additional layers of benefits added since 2008 because of the recession.

Earlier on Tuesday, Bunning objected to a request by [Maine](#) Sen. Susan Collins, a fellow Republican, to pass a 30-day extension of jobless benefits and other expired measures.

When asked Tuesday if Bunning was hurting the Republican Party, Collins said, "He's hurting the American people."

Other Republicans were more diplomatic in their assessments of Bunning, who has a stubborn and often irascible personality. Bunning is retiring at the end of the current term

and has a tense relationship with home state colleague and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who privately urged him to step aside.

Bunning had blocked the stopgap legislation since Thursday, insisting that Democrats find offsetting revenues or spending cuts to finance the bill. Instead, he settled for a vote to close a tax loophole enjoyed by paper companies that get a credit from burning "black liquor," a pulp-making byproduct, as if it were an alternative fuel. The amendment failed.

[Dick Durbin](#) of [Illinois](#), the Senate's No. 2 Democrat, said that Bunning was accepting an offer that he had rejected for days.

"As a result ... unemployment benefits were cut off for thousands of people across America, assistance for health care was cut off across America, thousands of federal employees were furloughed," Durbin said.

Democrats had promised to force Bunning to repeatedly lodge objections to bringing the bill to a vote. Otherwise it could take almost a week to slog through the procedural steps required to take up the measure and defeat Bunning's filibuster.

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