Bond holds up isotopes legislation

By T.J. GREANEY

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A battle is brewing over the need to build the U.S. capacity to produce medical isotopes, and the University of Missouri and U.S. Sen. Kit Bond are at the center of it.

Bond, a Missouri Republican, has placed a "hold" on the American Medical Isotope Production Act, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives by a vote of 400-17. The bill aims to promote U.S. production of the isotopes used in millions of medical tests annually, including cancer screenings, bone scans and screenings for heart disease.

There are five nuclear plants worldwide capable of producing the isotope known as moly-99, and all are outside the United States. Doctors and scientists have warned of a shortage of the isotopes because of plant shutdowns and growing demand.

Bond's legislative maneuver is preventing the bill from reaching the Senate floor.

Yesterday, a group of 19 physicians and scientists concerned with nuclear proliferation and the medical isotope shortage wrote a letter urging Bond to drop his hold on the bill.

But Bond is standing firm. He says the bill could have the exact opposite effect and actually shrink the global medical isotope supply. The bill would ban the export of highly enriched uranium for isotope production beginning seven years after the law takes effect. That ban is designed to spur other nations to convert their plants to use low-enriched uranium, which cannot be used in nuclear weapons.

Bond said this ban runs the risk of making the shortage of medical isotopes far worse by halting foreign production before the United States is ready to fill the demand.

"My primary concern is ensuring the millions of cancer patients get the cures they need," Bond said. "And this bill puts their treatment at risk."

The United States now exports highly enriched uranium to Canada and other allies who use it for the fuel and targets in their reactors. Bond's office estimates the United States would need to convert three reactors by 2018 at the latest to satisfy domestic medical demand. Only one of those projects is even on the drawing board, said a member of Bond's staff, and each project once proposed will require years of permitting and tens of millions of dollars of construction.

"The ban will be put in place before we have any guarantees that there will be medicine to come in after the ban," said a Bond staffer who has researched the bill and requested anonymity. But many nuclear advocates say this concern is unfounded. They point to a clause in the bill that allows the energy secretary to delay the ban on highly enriched uranium exports after seven years if a shortage of isotopes is imminent. Congress could further delay the ban after 13 years.
Advocates say the bill authorizes the Department of Energy to infuse $163 million in badly needed matching funds over five years to jump-start U.S. isotope production and, they say, Bond is needlessly blocking that money.

“The problem with” Bond’s “concerns is that they bear no resemblance to reality,” said Alan Kuperman, coordinator of the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Program at the University of Texas. “I can see no realistic prospect that this legislation would hurt the U.S. supply of medical isotopes.”

Kuperman, who signed the letter to Bond, said the legislation would help the United States meet its domestic demand for the isotopes in five years.

And then there is the MU Research Reactor. In late 2008, the university announced it was starting a $40 million project to build a facility near MURR along South Providence Road that would boost the local economy through construction jobs and the addition of 25 to 30 full-time positions. It was hoped the facility could begin producing moly-99 by 2012.

But the university did not apply for funding made available this year through the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration that was designed specifically for isotope production. Two private companies received $11.25 million from the NNSA, and the absence of MU, believed to be on the fast track to convert its reactor, raised eyebrows among those who closely watch nuclear issues.

“They’re definitely falling behind in the game because they did not apply in this first batch of candidates for matching funds,” Kuperman said of MURR. “The understanding is the reason they couldn’t get private funding is a lack of confidence in the private sector for the” MURR “project.”

Kuperman said he believes MURR has been unable to secure private investment for its project, and he believes the cost estimate of the project has swollen to approximately $150 million. Attempts to get comment from MU representatives were unsuccessful.

A representative from the office of Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., said MU officials did not express support for the isotope production act during meetings with Senate staff.

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With just over a month before the start of the fall semester, college students and their parents have yet to learn the full impact of last month's slashing of two key Missouri scholarship programs.

All they know for sure is that they'll be getting a lot less this year from Access Missouri and Bright Flight — the first helps low- and middle-income students, while the second targets the state's top students. It has left many students worried about the future.

"It's just nerve-wracking," said Oakville's Sarah Tharp, who is about to start her sophomore year at Missouri State University. "I have to be down there on the 13th of August, and I still don't know what I'm getting."

The situation is starting to clear up, however, with details emerging Wednesday on the status of a $30 million scholarship fund offered by the state's student loan authority to help offset some of Gov. Jay Nixon's education cuts.

The money — characterized as a one-time grant — has been in a sort of limbo for the last month, with both the state and the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority saying it was up to the other to decide how the money would be distributed.

But MOHELA's chief executive officer, Raymond Bayer Jr., said Wednesday that the money will be rolled into Access Missouri. The program was trimmed from $82 million to $32 million during last month's budget cuts. The loan authority is charged with increasing access to student lending for Missouri students. Last month, the authority announced it also had sufficient assets to pitch in $30 million for scholarships.

Even with the MOHELA money headed toward the beleaguered program, many students are expected to see their scholarships fall by $1,000 or more, creating uncertainty for students, many of whom have already paid deposits and fees to their schools. Many affected students will be
able to find other sources of money, but there are some who are already are stretched to the limit, said Faith Sandler, executive director of the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis.

"There is no extra $1,000 anywhere. They've tapped everything," Sandler said.

The prospect of declining awards has students like Carl Lewis II, of St. Louis, scrambling to make up the unexpected shortfall. Like many incoming freshmen, Lewis received a financial aid award letter in May — before the state gutted the Access Missouri fund. He was told to expect $1,500 from the need-based scholarship program as he prepares to pursue a chemical engineering degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Like others, he is waiting to find out just how far off that estimate will be. "It's very frustrating. But I'm trying to be very optimistic about the whole situation," Lewis said.

Figuring out where those awards will fall is the job of the Department of Higher Education, which administers both scholarship programs.

Bright Flight awards — for students who score high on ACTs and SATs — are expected to be around $1,500, down from $2,000 last year, but the final amounts won't be known until the state receives a last round of test scores to determine how many students are eligible. Those results should be in by early August.

The bigger wild card is the Access Missouri program, which offers three award levels, based on whether a student is attending a two-year, four-year public or four-year private school. Higher education officials say they have been waiting both on the MOHELA decision and new estimates on the number of eligible students. That last factor alone is expected to dampen the awards, with 102,000 students eligible this year compared with 86,000 in 2009.

Last year, students at four-year public schools received as much as $1,680 through the program. That number is expected to fall to $1,000 or less. And while officials wait for those final budget numbers, they acknowledge the potential for the delays to force some students to consider sitting out a semester.

"I hope that's not the case. But with every day that goes by, that concern becomes more acute," said Leroy Wade, assistant commissioner for Department of Higher Education.

Financial aid directors at the University of Missouri campuses in St. Louis and Columbia don't see that happening.

Both schools have been telling upperclassmen for a month to prepare for a worst-case scenario with $500 scholarships from Access Missouri. That creates the potential "that our estimate will be low and students will be very surprised," said Jim Brooks, director of financial aid at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Surprisingly, those award letters to upperclassmen haven't generated a lot of complaints — yet.
That could change soon, said Tony Georges, director of financial aid at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, which recently sent out its first round of bills, due Aug. 1.

"Make no mistake. When they sit down and start doing the arithmetic, they'll be calling," Georges said.

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JEFFERSON CITY — Missouri's college loan authority plans to give $30 million to the state to be distributed to students eligible for Access Missouri scholarships.

The Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority pledged in June to devote $30 million for scholarships, but details on how the money would be distributed had not been worked out.

The loan agency said Wednesday it has agreed to transfer the money to the Missouri Department of Higher Education for use in Access Missouri. The program is Missouri's main financial-needs based scholarship.

The money from MOHELA will offset part of a $50 million budget cut to the program announced last month by Gov. Jay Nixon.
An Iowa company is trying to get a Boone County judge to force the University of Missouri to stop work on a new patient care tower, saying the university accepted a bid that did not meet specifications.

Architectural Wall Systems of West Des Moines filed a petition for a temporary restraining order earlier this month.

The 300,000-square-foot patient care tower, a $203 million project, is being built on the north side of University Hospital and will house Ellis Fischel Cancer Center, operating rooms and private patient care rooms. In May, the university awarded a bid for glass and glazing work to Hilboldt Curtainwall, a St. Louis company. Crews have been on site since June. Work is ongoing.

The university earlier this year solicited bids for masonry, glass and glazing as one package but also requested the cost of glass and glazing as a separate bid. Architectural Wall submitted a bid in the amount of about $6.02 million for glass and glazing. Hilboldt submitted a bid of $7.94 million for all three components with the caveat that the company would deduct $2.96 million if awarded glass and glazing only. That made Hilboldt's glass and glazing bid some $600,000 less than Architectural Wall's bid.

Not only did Hilboldt fail to submit two separate bids as requested, the lawsuit claims, the company also included a list of conditions that deviated from the university's original specifications. For instance, Hilboldt excluded performing specific duties, such as taking measurements and cleaning, that were requested in the university's original proposal. Those exceptions "provided an unfair advantage to Hilboldt in the bidding process," the suit claims.

Kyle Whitaker, a Kearney resident, also is named as a plaintiff in the suit. He's a Missouri taxpayer who, according to the lawsuit, is hurt by the university's actions because they involve "a direct expenditure of funds generated through taxation."

The university doesn't comment on pending litigation, spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead said.

UM System attorneys filed a response Monday arguing that the plaintiffs have no standing to file suit. Whitaker, the taxpayer, isn't affected because the patient care tower isn't being funded with tax dollars; it's being funded through bonds that will be paid back with the health center's future operating revenues.

And Architectural Wall Systems is not a Missouri company and "is simply a 'disappointed bidder,'" the university contends, saying Missouri courts have consistently said disappointed bidders have no standing.
The lawsuit is asking a judge to rescind the award to Hilboldt and rebid the glass and glazing work.

Doing so would have a detrimental effect on the project, according to an affidavit given by Todd Wigginton, who works for the construction manager of the project. Wigginton estimated that halting construction to rebid the glass and glazing would delay completion by more than four months.

The plaintiffs’ attorneys were not available for comment this morning.

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Interstate 70 crash injures three teens

Charges are pending in a crash in which an Odessa teenager allegedly rear-ended a Columbia teen when they were driving on Interstate 70 last night, according to a Missouri State Highway Patrol crash report.

At about 5:05 p.m. yesterday, Garrison P. McLagan, 19, of Columbia was driving a 2010 Ford east near Mile Marker 23 in Jackson County.

A Garrison P. McLagan also is listed as a sophomore at the University of Missouri and as a member of the Missouri baseball team.

Derrian L. Kratz, 17, was driving eastbound in a 2001 Dodge when she struck the Ford McLagan was driving.

Three people in Kratz’s car reported suffering minor injuries and were taken to a local hospital: Kratz and passengers Aubrey A. Aldrich, 19, of Oak Grove and Logan A. Milton, 16, of Oak Grove.

Aldrich and Milton were not wearing seat belts. Kratz was wearing her seat belt. Her car was totaled.

McLagan was wearing his seat belt and did not report any injuries, but damage to his vehicle was extensive.

The highway patrol said an investigation is ongoing.