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US ban on exporting crude oil could be lifted soon

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(TNS)

WASHINGTON — Congress took a major step on Wednesday toward ending a 40-year-old ban on exporting U.S. crude oil as part of a massive package of spending and tax cuts.

A provision ending the ban is included in the \$1.1 trillion spending bill that the House may consider on Friday. The White House signaled that it would sign the legislation.

Ending the 1975 restrictions on crude exports was part of the last-minute deal making among congressional leaders and the White House. Lifting the ban has been a top priority of domestic oil producers looking for more markets to sell big supplies of crude.

Barry Russell, president and CEO of the Independent Petroleum Association of America, said, “By passing this legislation and lifting the outdated exports ban, American producers will be able to compete on a level playing field with countries like Iran and Russia, delivering energy security to our friends and allies, advancing the energy revolution that has revitalized our economy and providing meaningful benefits to families and consumers across the United States.”

President Barack Obama had been opposed to lifting the ban, and the White House even issued a veto threat just before the House passed a free-standing bill in October.

But the administration accepted the provision in a package that also includes extensions of tax breaks for wind and solar power, which are alternative energy sources that he favors.

Key Democrats in the House were frustrated that the crude oil ban language was included.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi, of California, told reporters, “At a time when the whole world had gathered in Paris — the whole world, every country of the world, leaders of the world came together to go forward in how we reduce emissions, and reducing dependence on fossil fuels — we’re shipping crude oil overseas, increasing our dependence on foreign oil.”

And Rep. Nita Lowey, of New York, the top Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, said the crude oil provision “leaves a sour taste about this package.” She said she regretted that such a major policy change was included in a bill that had to pass to keep the government funded.

Lowey said it would be difficult for some Democrats to support it.

However, 26 Democrats voted to lift the ban when the bill passed in October.

The provision in the package “prohibits any federal government official from imposing or enforcing any restriction on crude oil exports except in certain limited instances such as a national emergency declared by the President.”

Though Republicans strongly favored lifting the ban, some GOP lawmakers have other problems with the package. Conservatives wanted Planned Parenthood defunded, but Democrats and the White House wouldn't agree. They also wanted language making it tougher for refugees from Syria and Iraq to enter the United States; that language was not included.