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Baldwin: Cloning ban is too broad

By Libby Sander
Medill News Service
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WASHINGTON - The U.S. House approved a bill Thursday that would ban reproductive cloning along with less contentious cloning experiments like those conducted at the UW-Madison. U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin called the bill "outrageous" and said it would have a chilling effect on the U.S. role as a leader in biomedical research.

"Everyone in Congress agrees that we want to ban any attempt to clone a human being," Baldwin said. "However, this legislation is far too broad and reaches into other areas, including biomedical research using embryonic stem cells."

The legislation would outlaw cloning experiments that could be used for either reproductive cloning, which is denounced by most lawmakers and scientists alike, or therapeutic cloning, a growing area of research that some researchers say could hold the key to cures for diseases like Alzheimer's and diabetes.

Proposed by U.S. Rep. Dave Weldon, R-Fla., the bill had wide support from House Republicans, many of whom balk at cloning technology's use of embryos for research purposes. A bipartisan alternative proposed by U.S. Rep. James Greenwood, R-Pa., that suggested a ban solely on reproductive cloning - but allowed stem cell research and therapeutic cloning to continue - was defeated.

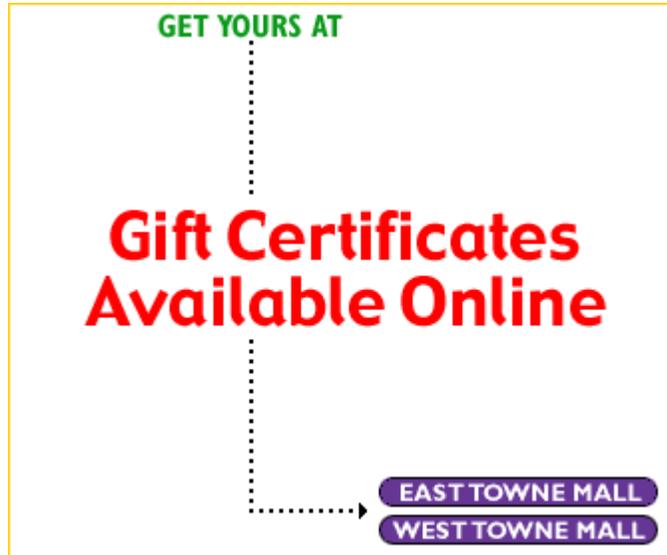
The House passed similar legislation in July 2001, but the measure failed to get a vote in the then-Democratic Senate. But Baldwin said she and other lawmakers who opposed the bill had no such hopes this time around.

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"The president would sign this if it came to his desk. All eyes will be on the Senate to help protect America's central role in the advancement of biomedical research," she said.



Embryonic stem cells were first developed by UW-Madison developmental biologist James Thomson in 1998. The university currently maintains five stem cell lines for research purposes - out of only a handful of viable lines known to exist worldwide, said R. Timothy Mulcahy, associate vice chancellor for research policy and associate dean for biological sciences at UW-Madison.

Scientists say embryonic stem cells are critical in providing a window into the earliest stages of human development - but more specifically, they allow researchers to learn more about the development of cell-based diseases.

Congress' wide ban on all types of embryonic stem cell research is "a legislation of suspicion," Mulcahy said, pointing out that virtually everyone in the scientific community opposes cloning for reproductive purposes.

"People don't want to clone humans," he said. "But you can accomplish that by having a ban on reproductive cloning. The extension to other types of cloning reflects the fact that legislators believe that they are taking the first step down a slippery slope."

U.S. Rep. Lee Sensenbrenner, R-Waukesha, who supported the measure, told lawmakers that any legislative attempt to ban human cloning must include embryos - but added that the bill didn't "in any way impede or

prohibit scientific research that does not employ human embryos."

But Robin Alta Charo, a professor of law and medical ethics at UW-Madison who had just returned from briefing legislators on Capitol Hill about the necessity of cloning technology, disagreed.

"I think it's unprecedented for them to criminalize an entire field of scientific research," she said. Embryonic stem cell research - specifically the somatic cell nuclear transfer procedure that the bill would outlaw - is "absolutely unique when it comes to helping us understand the mechanism of disease. We absolutely have to have this research done."

Although scientists at the UW-Madison aren't currently pursuing specific experiments involving the somatic cell nuclear transfer procedure, Mulcahy said embryonic stem cell research in general holds vast potential for science advancement.

It's hard to imagine all of the possibilities the technology holds, "and that's the sad part, in my opinion, of this type of legislation," he said. "It's closing the door on what we recognize as benefits - and to a whole lot of things we haven't even thought about at this time."

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