Congressional Outlook

Week of March 16th

The House and Senate are in session this week and the fiscal year 2016 budget will take center stage. House and Senate committees will mark up their blueprints for the next fiscal year. Also this week, Senate leaders are trying to break an impasse over bipartisan legislation to help victims of human trafficking, which has drawn a filibuster threat from Democrats who insist on removing abortion language. A cloture vote is scheduled for tomorrow, which is a way to limit debate and secure a vote on the bill. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has said the Senate will remain on the trafficking bill until it is passed.

House members plan to take up three measures that have drawn veto threats from the White House. Two of the bills would impose new requirements on Environmental Protection Agency science boards, and the third would overturn a National Labor Relations Board rule on labor-organizing practices. The House will also consider a number of bills pertaining to healthcare, including a bill to ensure that volunteer first responders are counted as volunteers, not employees, under the tax code.

Week in Review

Mikulski to Push Non-Defense Spending Cap Increase

Ranking Senate Appropriations Committee member Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) plans to push an increase in the cap on non-defense spending. Under the Budget Control Act of 2011,
discretionary spending for FY 2016 is capped at $577 billion for defense and $530 billion for non-defense programs. A number of lawmakers, including Senator John McCain (R-AZ), have vowed to fight for an increase in the defense spending cap, and Mikulski plans to put as much pressure on the non-defense cap. Mikulski and Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, have emphasized that the non-defense spending cap affects the Department of Justice, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and other programs that they say are just as important for national security as the Department of Defense. Read more...

Marketplace Fairness Act Introduced in Senate

Last week, Senators Mike Enzi (R-WY), Dick Durbin (D-IL), Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) introduced the Marketplace Fairness Act (MFA) of 2015 (S. 698). Similar to the legislation that passed the Senate twice, the bill would allow states and local governments to enforce existing sales tax laws. Additional cosponsors joining the four senators for introduction included Sens. Roy Blunt (R-MO), Jack Reed (D-RI), Bob Corker (R-TN), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), and Angus King, Jr. (I-ME).

Also last week, the National Governors Association sent a letter to House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) to encourage movement on the MFA, as the House has not taken up the bill after Senate passage. The letter urged Speaker Boehner to push the bill and noted the pitfalls of a competing bill floated by House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) earlier this year. Read more...

Junior Senator Pens Letter to Iran

Last week, Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) sent a letter to Iran about making a deal with President Obama on the Administration's nuclear program. The letter was signed by 47 GOP senators, including Cotton. Late last week, however, Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Ron Johnson (R-WI) appeared to step away from the letter, with Senator McCain noting that he had signed amid a general haste to get out of DC before the March 5 snowstorm and Senator Johnson observing that it might have been wrong to have sent the letter directly to the Iran leadership. Read more...

Congressional Schedule

Tuesday, March 17

- House Transportation and Infrastructure Full Committee hearing on the "Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill: Laying the Foundation for U.S. Economic Growth and Job Creation Part II."
- House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on Federal Lands oversight hearing on "Examining the Spending Priorities and Missions of the National Park Service in the President's FY 2016 Budget Proposal."
• House Energy and Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Energy and Power hearing on “EPA's Proposed 111d Rule for Existing Power Plants: Legal and Cost Issues.”
• House Oversight and Government Reform Full Committee hearing on “FCC: Process and Transparency.”
• House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources oversight hearing on "Examining the Spending Priorities and Missions of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) and the Office of Natural Resources Revenue (ONRR) in the President's FY 2016 Budget Proposals."
• House Science, Space and Technology hearing entitled, “Reality Check: The Impact and Achievability of EPA's Proposed Ozone Standards.”
• House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies budget hearing on the Department of Agriculture, Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services.
• House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies budget hearing on the National Science Foundation.
• House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies budget hearing on the National Park Service.
• House Agriculture Committee Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry hearing on Waters of the U.S.
• Senate Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies hearing to examine proposed budget estimates and justification for FY 2016 for the Department of Agriculture.
• Senate Energy and Natural Resources Full Committee hearing to examine the state of technological innovation related to the electric grid.
• Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Subcommittee on Fisheries, Water, and Wildlife hearing to examine S. 659, to protect and enhance opportunities for recreational hunting, fishing, and shooting.
• Senate Homeland Security Full Committee hearing to examine securing the Southwest border, focusing on perspectives from beyond the beltway.
• Senate Judiciary Full Committee hearing to examine immigration reform, focusing on the American worker.
• Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee Subcommittee on Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security oversight hearing to examine the President's proposed budget request for FY 2016 for the Transportation Security Administration.

Wednesday, March 18

• House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies oversight hearing on "Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education."
• House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies budget hearing on the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development.
• House Agriculture Full Committee hearing on the Importance of Trade to U.S.
Agriculture.

- House Homeland Security Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency hearing on "Unmanned Aerial System Threats: Exploring Security Implications and Mitigation Technologies."
- House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources oversight hearing on the "Effect of the President's FY 2016 Budget and Legislative Proposals for the Office of Surface Mining on Private Sector Job Creation, Domestic Energy Production, State Programs and Deficit Reduction."
- House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment hearing on the President's FY 2016 Budget: Administration Priorities for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.
- House Small Business Full Committee hearing on "Tangled in Red Tape: New Challenges for Small Manufacturers."
- Senate Environment and Public Works Full Committee hearing to examine S. 697, to amend the Toxic Substances Control Act and to reauthorize and modernize that Act.
- Senate Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on the Department of Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies hearings to examine proposed budget estimates and justification for FY 2016 for the Forest Service.
- Senate Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies hearing to examine proposed budget estimates and justification for FY 2016 for the Department of Transportation.
- Senate Judiciary Full Committee hearing to examine the impact of patent litigation practices on the American economy.
- Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Full Committee hearing to examine the Federal Communications Commission.
- Joint Economic Committee hearing to examine the Economic Report of the President 2015.

Thursday, March 19

- House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on Federal Lands and Subcommittee on Water, Power, and Oceans joint hearing on "Examining the Spending Priorities and Missions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the President's FY 2016 Budget Proposal."
- House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies budget hearing on the Surface Transportation Programs.
- House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies budget hearing on the Department of Agriculture, Farm and Foreign Agriculture Services.
- House Energy and Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Communications and Technology hearing on the “FCC Reauthorization: Oversight of the Commission.”
- Senate Finance Full Committee hearing to examine the Affordable Care Act at five years.
- Senate Energy and Natural Resources Full Committee hearing to examine U.S. crude oil export policy.
- Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Full Committee hearing to examine patent reform, focusing on protecting innovation and entrepreneurship.