

## Senate Passes Bill To Avert Helium Shortage

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Matthew Daly, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Break out the balloons.

Congress moved a step closer Thursday to averting an impending shutdown of the federal helium reserve, a key supplier of the lighter-than-air gas used in a products ranging from party balloons to MRI machines.

The Federal Helium Program, which provides about 42 percent of the nation's helium from a storage site near Amarillo, Texas, is set to shut down Oct. 7 unless lawmakers intervene. The shutdown is a result of a 1996 law requiring the reserve to pay off a \$1.3 billion debt by selling its helium.

The debt is paid, but billions of cubic feet of helium remain. Closing the reserve would cause a worldwide helium shortage — an outcome lawmakers from both parties hope to avoid.

The Senate approved a bill Thursday, 97-2, to continue the helium program, following action in the House this spring.

Preserving access to the federal helium supply "prevents a shock to the health care sector and other critical industries that depend on helium," Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., chairman of the Senate Energy Committee, said. "Protecting America's manufacturing base, its research capabilities, its health care system and its national security by temporarily extending the life of the (federal) helium program is just common sense."

Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, said thousands of high-tech manufacturing jobs in the United States depend on a reliable supply of helium.

If the federal government stops selling helium to private entities, "a significant delay might not just slow the production of computer chips, but the computers, life-saving medical devices and weapons systems that they power," Simpson said.

Micron Technology, a Boise-based semiconductor manufacturer, is among companies that depend on helium, Simpson said. The computer chip industry employs a quarter-million people nationwide, Simpson said.

The Senate bill approved Thursday differs slightly from a bill approved in the House in April. President Barack Obama favors the Senate version.

A statement by the White House called helium an essential resource for the aerospace industry and production of computer chips and optical fiber, as well as medical uses including MRI machines and medical lasers. Helium also is used in national defense applications such as rocket engine testing and purging,

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surveillance devices and scientific balloons.

"The impending abrupt shutdown of this program would cause a spike in helium prices that would harm many U.S. industries and disrupt national security programs," the White House said.

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