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Major decisions awaiting Congress

Hurricane relief, high court nominees, immigration dominate agenda

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WASHINGTON - Here are some of the matters Congress will take up in the coming weeks:

Hurricane Katrina

Congress on Friday approved \$10.5 billion in emergency funds to aid in the relief and recovery efforts. But Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz., chairman of a House Appropriations subcommittee, predicts that amount will last just seven days.

The House and Senate will be looking to act on more sweeping measures this week and probably eventually will approve more than \$100 billion in disaster aid.

Legislative actions could go beyond passage of supplemental spending bills to such things as temporarily approving the relocation of the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, based in New Orleans, and waiving tax deadlines for businesses hit by the disaster.

Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., chairman of a Senate panel on terrorism, technology and homeland security, plans hearings in Washington soon on what went wrong with the federal relief efforts in the wake of the hurricane, what should have been done and what needs to be done.

And Rep. John Shadegg, R-Ariz., said he plans to introduce legislation this week that will help expedite and encourage construction of new and expanded oil refineries.

Supreme Court

President Bush's nomination Monday of John Roberts to succeed the late William Rehnquist as chief justice instead of Roberts replacing retiring justice Sandra Day O'Connor, can be expected to thicken the partisan air of Roberts' confirmation hearing.

That hearing has been reset for no earlier than Thursday and no later than Monday.

At age 50, Roberts would be the youngest chief justice in more than 200 years, and he could lead the court for decades.

The confirmation hearing will begin with a formal introduction and opening statement by Roberts. There also will be opening statements by committee members, including Kyl.

Although Roberts in recent weeks seemed destined to sail through bipartisan confirmation, a Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, on Monday signaled that the scrutiny of Roberts will intensify.

"The chief justice is the most important judge in the country, with even more responsibility for the protection of the rights and freedoms of all Americans," Kennedy said.

Kennedy and other liberals on the Judiciary Committee, including Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., have raised concerns about what they describe as Roberts' roles in the 1980s in efforts to weaken voting rights, roll back women's rights and impede progress toward a more equal nation.

Democrats on Monday also were calling on Bush to reveal his next choice as a successor to O'Connor before the Senate acts on Roberts' new nomination, expressing concerns about the overall balance of the high court.

Ed Gillespie, the former GOP National Committee chairman who is working on behalf of the White House to help get Roberts through the confirmation process, told reporters for *The Arizona Republic*, Gannett News Service and *USA Today* last week that Roberts has been fully prepared for the tough road ahead. But Gillespie was talking then about Roberts succeeding O'Connor.

The high court opens its new term Oct. 3.

Immigration reform

Congressional leaders and Bush say they would like to see an immigration reform bill passed by the end of the year.

Hearings in Congress probably will be held, but it is uncertain whether a bill can be agreed upon by the House and Senate by December.

Much of the difficulty lies in a solution that must thread the needle between hard-liners within the GOP who want to tighten border security and crack down on immigration lawbreakers, and other lawmakers, including some Republicans, who want to create a guest-worker program.

Arizona's two GOP senators, Kyl and John McCain, are co-sponsors of competing bills with different approaches. And Rep. J.D. Hayworth, R-Ariz., says he'll soon introduce his own bill that will concentrate on tighter border controls.

In addition, the White House recently launched a separate effort to develop a coalition of business groups and immigrant advocates that might come up with a plan they could all back.

Former Rep. Cal Dooley, a Democrat from California and president of the Food Products Association who is helping to lead the White House effort, said he doubts that a bill can be passed by December.

"Especially in light of the events in New Orleans, as well as the Supreme Court nominee's hearings this fall, the legislative agenda is getting more crowded, and it might be difficult to see a comprehensive immigration bill passed this fall," Dooley said.

Budget and tax cuts

High on the congressional agenda before Hurricane Katrina were various tax-related measures, including a bill sponsored by Kyl to permanently eliminate the estate tax and another bill that would stretch out the 15 percent rate on capital gains and dividends from 2008 to 2010.

The estate tax, dubbed the "death tax" by opponents, is paid by less than 2 percent of Americans, those who inherit estates worth at least \$1.5 million. The tax rate is slated to continue dropping through 2010.

But under current law, it can return in full force in 2011. Kyl and supporters of a permanent repeal might seek a compromise short of repeal if they can't get 60 votes needed to block a filibuster by opponents.

Michael Franc, a former congressional aide who is vice president of government relations at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said committees of Congress also will be working to identify as much as \$35 billion in spending reductions over five years under a reconciliation process agreed upon by the House and Senate.

Medicaid is expected to take the biggest hit, with up to \$10 billion in Medicaid savings required of a bill that Congress must pass by year's end.

Under the same reconciliation process, the House and Senate agriculture committees must reduce agriculture spending by \$3 billion.

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