

Inside Wisconsin: Tom Still, “Reconciling federal R&D bills won’t be easy; can Wisconsin members help?”

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MADISON, Wis. – Two years ago, when the bill was called “The Endless Frontier Act,” Wisconsin’s Mike Gallagher was among four bipartisan members of Congress who took the lead in pushing for deeper federal investment in science and technology to re-energize economic growth.

Today, the Green Bay Republican is not among the 90 or so members of the House of Representatives who will meet as a “conference committee” to iron out differences between successor bills, one from each chamber.

Instead, Wisconsin will be represented in coming weeks and months by Sen. Tammy Baldwin, a Democrat, and Reps. Tom Tiffany and Scott Fitzgerald, both Republicans.

What happened? It’s less about Gallagher losing interest in the notion of rejuvenated federal research and development investment, but more about conflicting Capitol Hill priorities brought on by war in Ukraine, chronic shortages of semiconductors, growing unease over China’s ambitions in the world, and the revival of disputes over trade, climate change and immigration.

Bills passed by the Senate and House still share enough common ground to be rolled into one, but it won’t be as easy. The legislative clutter now surrounding what

The Endless Frontier Act originally envisioned may make it difficult to clear a path to compromise.

Named for a post-World War II report that sparked an American surge in science, engineering and technology investment, The Endless Frontier Act called for boosting specific tech and manufacturing sectors - semiconductor chips included - over the course of 10 years.

The bill was inspired by a 2019 Brookings Institution report that concluded the nation's economy would be stronger and more diversified if R&D spending was less concentrated on the East and West Coasts and more dispersed in emerging centers with domestic manufacturing potential.

That's still the basic goal, but there are important differences. How (and if) those differences are resolved is vital to Wisconsin:

- The Senate bill would boost spending by \$250 billion over 10 years; the House \$400 billion.
- The Senate version would invest \$29 billion over five years in a new National Science Foundation directorate focused on artificial intelligence, semiconductors and advanced computing, robotics, biotechnology, advanced materials and more. The House bill sets aside \$13.3 billion over five years for a new NSF directorate, but lists climate change, environmental sustainability, and social and economic equality among its more general targets.
- Both bills would establish regional technology hubs (the Senate with \$10 billion; the House with \$7 billion) with the Senate calling for 10 such hubs and the House seven.

Easing the semiconductor shortage, made worse by the war in Ukraine and overall reliance on foreign sources, may be the glue that holds the package together. Such chips are used in everything from cars to telecommunications, from computers to healthcare, and from defense systems to clean energy production. The market is dominated by China and Taiwan.

Rifts between the Senate and House versions are most likely to emerge over items such as: retraining workers who lose jobs due to imports; trade tariffs; creating immigration visa paths for highly skilled workers; and the House emphasis on climate change, environmental resiliency and social goals versus the engineering-focused Senate approach.

If the negotiations fail and little more than semiconductor reinvestment is approved, that's not a win for Wisconsin because there isn't much of a chip industry here.

If the broader goal of shifting more R&D research and manufacturing to the Heartland is realized, Wisconsin and its neighbors win because of a strong foundation in most of the science, tech and manufacturing disciplines on the table.

The 2019 Brookings Institute report and its follow-ups listed two Wisconsin cities – Madison and Milwaukee – among its top 36 potential growth areas. Other Midwest cities were on the list, as well. That's a big reason why Gallagher and his bipartisan colleagues sponsored The Endless Frontier Act a few months later.

Wisconsin's three members of the conference committee can help steer the process in the right direction with some old-fashioned give-and-take. That's not a specialty in Washington these days, but it's well worth a try.