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Measure Easing Drug Imports Passes in House

By ROBERT PEAR

WASHINGTON, July 11 — The House voted today to make it easier for people to import low-cost prescription drugs for their own use, after rejecting a more sweeping proposal to allow such imports by drug wholesalers and pharmacies.

The vote to permit imports for personal use was 324 to 101. The other proposal was rejected, 267 to 159.

Both proposals reflected growing concern about high drug costs. Similar legislation sailed through the House and Senate last year, but it included an escape clause that was invoked by both the Clinton and Bush administrations, which said the import plan would not be safe.

Increasingly, Americans are looking to foreign countries as a source of prescription drugs, and the government contends that most such imports are illegal. Drug prices are often lower outside the United States, in part because other countries control prices differently.

Drug companies mobilized lobbyists to oppose the legislation, saying it would allow the sale of adulterated and counterfeit drugs that pose huge risks to consumers.

President Bush endorsed easing the rules on drug imports in the campaign last year. But this week the White House and the Food and Drug Administration opposed the measures, saying they could "result in unsafe, unapproved or counterfeit drugs being imported into the United States."

The two proposals were amendments to a spending bill for the Food and Drug Administration and the Agriculture Department.

Representative Gil Gutknecht, Republican of Minnesota, was the author of the adopted proposal, which would make it easier for Americans to buy medicines from abroad by mail order and other means.

"My amendment ensures that law-abiding citizens will be able to import legal, F.D.A.-approved prescription drugs made in F.D.A.-approved facilities," Mr. Gutknecht said. "While seniors in the United States are struggling to pay for medicine, those in other countries are paying 30 percent to 70 percent less for the exact same drugs."

The more sweeping proposal, which the House rejected, was offered by Representative Bernard Sanders, independent of Vermont. "Prescription-drug distributors and pharmacists should be able to purchase and sell F.D.A.-approved medicines at the same prices as they are bought and sold in Canada, England and every other industrialized country," Mr. Sanders said.

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But opponents said the Sanders proposal would strip the Food and Drug Administration and the Customs Service of their ability to enforce laws that protect consumers against drugs made in back alleys and rat-infested laboratories in Latin America and Asia.

Representative Charlie Norwood, Republican of Georgia, denounced the Sanders proposal as a threat to drug safety. "If you liked the Mexican strawberries that poisoned our schoolchildren, then you'll love the Red Chinese sugar pills labeled amoxicillin that allow a child's strep throat to become heart disease," Mr. Norwood said, referring to a widely used antibiotic.

Many Democrats said they endorsed reducing drug costs but believed it was wrong to pursue that goal by lowering safety standards.

"I agree we need to control the cost of prescription drugs to seniors," said Representative David R. Obey, Democrat of Wisconsin. "But we should not run the risk of allowing large numbers of adulterated drugs into this country."

Many people who opposed Mr. Sanders's proposal voted for Mr. Gutknecht's. Only 35 Republicans voted for the Sanders amendment, but 149 supported the Gutknecht proposal. While 123 Democrats voted for the Sanders amendment, 173 voted for Mr. Gutknecht's.

Representative Richard M. Burr, Republican of North Carolina, who voted against both proposals, said that the Food and Drug Administration provided a "gold standard" for regulation of drugs and that the standard would be undermined by easing the rules for imports.

The drug industry opposed both amendments. Alan F. Holmer, president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, a trade association, welcomed rejection of the Sanders proposal and said the group would also "continue to oppose the 'personal use' exemption in the Senate."