

US Congress acts to avert helium shortage

September 26 2013

The US Congress, entrenched in a titanic budget battle, managed to come together Thursday to pass legislation that prevents a market shortage of helium.

In a rare show of consensus between feuding Democrats and Republicans, the Senate unanimously passed a bill approved earlier by the House of Representatives that cancels closure of the national helium reserve.

The closure had been planned for October 7, but manufacturers and the medical industry had expressed concern that the move would hurt them.

The Federal Helium Program, operated under the Bureau of Land Management, supplies some 42 percent of the lighter-than-air gas used in the United States, and roughly 35 percent of global demand.

Helium, an inert chemical element extracted from natural gas, has been produced and stored by the US government since World War I. It was initially used for military purposes, including in reconnaissance aircraft.

It is now considered essential for the [aerospace industry](#), fiber optics and computer chip manufacturing, welding, as well as several medical fields including [magnetic resonance imaging](#). And for party balloons, of course.

"The impending abrupt shutdown of this program would cause a spike in helium prices that would harm many US industries and disrupt national

security programs," the White House's Office of Management and Budget said in a policy statement last week.

By October 7, the government would have been required to end helium sales to the private sector, which has yet to develop sufficient infrastructure production and could have faced a surge in prices.

Several industrial giants including General Electric, Intel and Siemens, as well as dozens of university professors, started a campaign to lobby Congress about the need to change course.

The bill, which now awaits President Barack Obama's signature, provides for continuation of helium sales by auction until the reserve is gradually depleted.

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