

Thune wants veto on BRAC

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WASHINGTON - Congress would have what amounts to line-by-line veto power over which military installations should be closed or realigned under an amendment proposed Monday by Sen. John Thune, R-S.D.

In the latest legislative effort related to the Defense Base Closure and Realignment, or BRAC, process, the amendment would allow Congress to disprove BRAC Commission decisions on individual installations. Currently, Congress acts on the decisions as a whole after the president approves them.

The BRAC Commission is charged with reviewing the Department of Defense recommendations on closing or realigning military bases. Ellsworth Air Force base is on the DOD list of bases that would close, and advocates for Ellsworth have been making a case before the BRAC Commission to reverse that recommendation.

In the meantime, the amendment introduced Monday is one of three Thune proposed to delay or change the BRAC process. All are co-sponsored by Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., and eight other Democratic and Republican senators with military installations on the closing list. All were introduced as amendments to the \$442 billion defense authorization bill.

Another of the amendments calls for delaying the current BRAC round of base closings until recommendations on overseas bases are analyzed, until the Quadrennial Defense Review is received early next year and until "substantially all major combat units" deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan have returned.

"These amendments will give Congress the information and power we need to avoid a grievous mistake," Thune said in a written statement.

"We should not move forward with permanent base closures in such a quickly changing world. These common-sense amendments will slow down the process, while ensuring Congress has the power and information it needs to do the right thing."

The third amendment "extends whistleblower protections to members of the armed services who might disagree with the Pentagon's BRAC recommendations" and who want to give information to the BRAC Commission.

Thune and Johnson have acknowledged that the efforts face an uphill battle. Similar measures to delay the BRAC process and allow current military personnel to testify before the BRAC commission without repercussions were originally introduced as stand-alone legislation, but they are stalled in the Senate Armed Services Committee.

By introducing the measures as amendments to the defense authorization bill, "it is a way of taking them directly to the floor," Thune spokesman Alex Conant said.

The three amendments could be voted on as early as today or after Congress' August recess, depending on the results of a cloture vote to limit amendments and debate. It takes 60 votes to invoke cloture, in which case voting would begin on amendments. But it is likely that the cloture vote will fail and that the defense authorization bill will be put off until after the recess.

President Bush has threatened to veto the defense bill if it includes provisions to delay the BRAC process.

The BRAC measures are among a slew of possible amendments to the defense bill, including one dealing with rules for the treatment and interrogation of terrorism suspects.

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