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Support grows for cloning ban

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The passage of a US law banning all cloning, including for therapeutic purposes, seemed more likely yesterday after sponsors of a Senate bill said they had pulled together a broad coalition in support of the legislation.

The Senate plans to take up debate on the bill later this month. The US House of Representatives passed similar legislation last year and President George W. Bush has promised to sign a ban. A rival Senate bill would outlaw cloning babies but would permit cloning of cells and tissue for medical purposes.

Activist Jeremy Rifkin yesterday brandished a statement signed by environmentalists, feminists, university professors and celebrities - including novelist Norman Mailer - in support of a cloning ban. Broadening backing for the legislation marks a shift from last year, when much of the bill's support came from conservative right-to-lifers concerned about the destruction of human embryos.

Drug makers are fearful the bill would make it possible for the first time in US history to imprison scientists conducting research into disease. "What's at stake is the principle of freedom of inquiry," said Tom Okarma, chief executive of the stem cell research group Geron Corporation. "The entire scientific community will be and should be outraged if a ban passes the Senate."

While President Bush's limits on stem cell research last year affected only publicly funded research - primarily university laboratories - the prohibition of all cloning would directly affect the private sector.

Researchers say cloning technology could be used to create embryos, from which stem cells can be extracted. Embryonic stem cells are capable of forming any type of human tissue, and some hope the method could be used to help victims of Alzheimer's, heart disease and other illnesses. Because cloned body parts are formed from patients' own DNA, scientists hope to use the technology to overcome the risk of immune rejection.