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Measure to change U. of Neb. stem-cell rule fails

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LINCOLN, Neb. -- The University of Nebraska's governing board on Friday voted not to place tighter restrictions on embryonic stem cell research than those outlined under federal guidelines, which were expanded after President Barack Obama took office.

The Board of Regents, which is elected, voted 4-4 on a proposition to limit the stem cell research at the university to types allowed under President George W. Bush. The board needed a majority of its eight members to approve the measure, and many backers thought they had the necessary votes.

But board member Jim McClurg, who was endorsed for his post by an anti-abortion group that opposes embryonic stem cell research, Nebraska Right to Life, voted against the resolution.

McClurg said he would have voted differently three years ago.

"I was against embryonic stem cell research then - on the record," said McClurg.

"I've received so much information since then. It's been quite a three-year crash course in embryonic stem cell research," he said.

Last year, about \$88 million in federal funding went to embryonic stem cell research, according to the National Institutes of Health. The University of Nebraska saw none of that funding because of the tight federal guidelines, said Tom Rosenquist, vice chancellor of the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Now that the guidelines have been relaxed to allow funding for new stem cell lines, Rosenquist said, about six university researchers plan to apply for as much as \$7 million over the next several years.

Friday's vote came 20 months after a state law was enacted prohibiting the use of state resources for creating or destroying embryos for research. That law had been a compromise between abortion opponents and University of Nebraska researchers in which abortion foes agreed not to push for further legislation if certain conditions were met.

Some supporters of the researchers have said that agreement extends to the regents. But abortion opponents have said the compromise was never meant to keep them from lobbying the regents for policy changes.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center has teams conducting research on approved stem cell lines, including studies of the liver, emphysema and stem cell mechanics.

Supporters of embryonic stem cell research hope it will lead to cures for diseases such as diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Opponents believe embryos, which are destroyed during the research, are the starting point of human life and that destroying them is immoral.

Friday's vote followed nearly two hours of public comment from those both for and against the restrictions.

Among those who opposed restricting the research were University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken and the chancellor of the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Dr. Harold Maurer. Both had said they feared such restrictions would cost the university in research funding and repel the country's top scientists.

University officials must now work to change the perception that the University of Nebraska's leaders are inclined to implement policies that could limit research in developing areas, Maurer said.

"I got two e-mails yesterdays from scientists we were trying to recruit that said they won't come to Nebraska until you settle your embryonic stem cell issue," the medical school chancellor said. "There is a perception there that has people asking, 'Should I invest my career there or not?' I mean, if you had a blossoming career, would you go to Nebraska, where you could be stymied?"