



## Senate passes controversial online sex trafficking bill

Harper Neidig

March 21, 2018

The Senate on Wednesday passed a controversial online sex trafficking bill, sending it to President Trump's desk and capping off a months-long legislative fight driven by concerns from the tech industry.

The legislation, called the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), but also referred to as SESTA, would cut into the broad protections websites have from legal liability for content posted by their users. Those protections are codified in Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act from 1996, a law that many internet companies see as vital to protecting their platforms and that SESTA would amend to create an exception for sex trafficking.

Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), the most outspoken critic of SESTA and one of the authors of the 1996 law, said that making exceptions to Section 230 will lead to small internet companies having to face an onslaught of frivolous lawsuits.

"In the absence of Section 230, the internet as we know it would shrivel," Wyden said on the Senate floor ahead of the vote Wednesday. "Only the platforms run by those with deep pockets, and an even deeper bench of lawyers, would be able to make it."

The Oregon Democrat also noted opposition from groups as varied as the Cato Institute, the Human Rights Campaign and the ACLU.

But some lawmakers and sex trafficking advocates think that the law has gotten in the way of efforts to go after online sex trafficking suspects like Backpage.com.

And most major internet giants have gone quiet in the fight over the controversial bill. Facebook endorsed SESTA as the company faced scrutiny on other fronts over alleged Russian efforts to use the platform to conduct a disinformation campaign aimed at U.S. voters.

The House overwhelmingly passed the bill last month, and President Trump is expected to sign it.