

The FBI shut down three of the largest online poker sites last month as part of an Obama administration crackdown.

Republicans offered some hope Tuesday to online poker players sidelined by the Obama administration's "Black Friday" crackdown.

Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas) is planning to introduce legislation that would legalize and regulate online poker and said he hopes the measure can pass both chambers of Congress this session.

"Poker is a game of skill," Barton said in defense of the sites during a press conference outside the Capitol.

He suggested those who believe poker to be a game of chance should try playing with their own money against world champion Greg Raymer, who stood behind him at the press conference.

The FBI shut down three of the largest online poker sites last month as part of the Obama administration's enforcement of online gambling and piracy statutes.

U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement seized another 10 online betting sites Monday, including two popular poker sites.

Barton said he has spoken to the leadership of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, including Chairman Fred Upton (R-Mich.), and hopes to move a bill through the committee in the near future. Barton said the bill is being finalized in consultation with the Poker Players Alliance (PPA).

The news that the House Commerce Committee might soon consider the bill is welcome for online poker supporters, since House Financial Services Committee Chairman Spencer Bachus

(R-Ala.) is a strong opponent of legalizing online gambling in any form.

The Financial Services Committee passed a legalization bill last year under the leadership of then-Chairman Barney Frank (D-Mass.), but the bill did not pass Congress.

Financial Services member **John Campbell (R-Calif.)** said he doesn't play poker but knows that banning it would be futile because tens of millions of Americans enjoy the game.

"With this here, it won't be Americans playing on foreign sites, it will be foreigners playing on American sites," Campbell said, arguing that legalizing and regulating online poker would create jobs in the U.S. and protect consumers from shady foreign operators.

Barton called the current law unenforceable and argued that online poker itself isn't illegal, so the government has targeted the deposits made by players instead. An estimated 10 million Americans played poker online until recently, including roughly 50,000 PPA members who depend on it for their livelihood.

Barton indicated both Upton and Commerce sub-panel Chairwoman Mary Bono Mack (R-Calif.) are receptive to holding a hearing on his online poker bill this summer.

PPA executive director John Pappas said his organization has been meeting with more than 100 House members, including many on the Energy and Commerce Committee, to round up support for legislation.

Pappas said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) is "very interested" in crafting legislation and said his organization is waiting for Reid to indicate how he wants to move in the Senate. But he called the issue urgent for the online poker community.

"I think players more than ever are saying, 'Hey, we need a bill,' " Pappas said, pointing out there are still an estimated 1,700 Internet gambling sites up and running. "We need some

clarity. ... We need U.S.-owned and -regulated sites."