

WASHINGTON (AP) — Roll up your sleeves, the flu shots are coming.

Congress passed a swine flu insurance program Tuesday, ending a stalemate that had threatened to leave the vaccine sitting on manufacturers' shelves. Health officials now say swine flu inoculations will be available starting next month.

Brushing aside usual procedural niceties, the House and Senate both voted Tuesday to get the program moving in the wake of some concern over a mysterious disease that has killed 27 persons in Pennsylvania. That disease has not been linked to flu.

Saying an outbreak of swine flu "could mean the death of millions of people," President Ford had urged passage of the insurance bill in telephone calls made Tuesday morning to congressional leaders.

Ford is certain to sign the measure.

The first shots next month will go to the elderly and chronically ill. The rest of the nation is expected to start getting the free shots by about mid-October, officials said.

Four drug firms already have processed 120 million doses of vaccine but refused to sell any to the government until securing protection against lawsuits by users who might suffer adverse effects.

Government intervention in the liability protection facet of the program became necessary after private insurers refused to provide coverage to vaccine producers. Insurers claimed billions of dollars worth of claims might be filed if problems arose from what would be the biggest mass inoculation program in U.S. history.

Under the legislation, passed on unanimous voice vote by the Senate, and

on a 250 to 83 vote by the House, the government would pay the legal defense bill against any lawsuits brought by vaccine users,

If a complainant proved negligence against a drug firm or volunteer medical personnel administering the shot the government could sue to collect from the private insurer for the drug firm or practitioner.

But the government is going to wind up paying the manufacturers' insurance premiums for even this limited coverage. After drug and firms negotiate a price, that amount will be added to the price drug firms are charging the government for the vaccine.

But the legislation prohibits

manufacturers from making any outright profits on the swine flu vaccine.

To try to hold down potential lawsuits, the bill requires court action to begin within two years of any alleged injury or damages.