

OKLAHOMA CITY — A Republican lawmaker on Monday filed proposed legislation to create a state guest worker program for illegal immigrants. Sen. Harry Coates of Seminole said Senate Bill 995 is designed to re-attract workers who may have left the state following the passage of House Bill 1804, the Oklahoma Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act of 2007. “Since the passage of House Bill 1804, we’ve seen a mass exodus of undocumented immigrants who have taken up residence in Texas and other surrounding states where they pump millions of dollars into those economies,” Coates said. “House Bill 1804 did little more than put Oklahoma companies at a disadvantage by sending dedicated, knowledgeable workers to competing companies in other states. Losing that work force has been devastating for many of Oklahoma’s industries, including agriculture, energy and construction.” Out-of-state companies are now coming to Oklahoma and winning contracts with the work force that was driven out of the state by HB 1804, Coates said. SB 995 would direct the Oklahoma Department of Labor to administer a guest worker program. Under the bill, undocumented workers ages 18 and older could stay in the state if they bought a \$2,000 guest worker permit, renewable every two years. Applicants would have to find a sponsor willing to hire them and provide basic health insurance, according to the measure. If the worker loses his or her job, the worker would have 30 days to find another employer as a sponsor. The guest worker would be barred from driving under the measure. Applicants would have to agree to a criminal background check and could not have a felony on their record. The measure also would create an immediate family permit that would provide protection to the guest worker’s immediate family members, including spouses and children. The family permit would cost \$500 per person. The federal government would have to grant a waiver to allow program. Coates said he was uncertain how the state would seek a waiver, adding that it would be up to the Department of Labor to determine. Carol Helm, director of Immigration Reform for Oklahoma Now, said the measure has no chance of passing if lawmakers read it. “It

is unneeded,” said Helm of Jenks. “It is a farce.” She said the measure would allow big companies to hire workers at reduced wages. Coates said the measure could secure passage if the business community, including contractors and the oil and gas industry, got behind it. Rep. Randy Terrill, R-Moore, the author of HB 1804, said the proposal was “not only goofy, but outrageous.” He said the Coates’ proposal is tantamount to selling citizenship. “The bottom line is his proposal is so unbelievably out of touch that I don’t think it has a snowball’s chance of passing,” Terrill said. He credited HB 1804 with reducing the state’s unemployment rate and increasing pay in certain fields. HB 1804 bans workers here illegally from obtaining a government-issued identification card and most forms of public assistance or entitlements. It makes it a felony to harbor, transport, conceal or shelter an illegal alien, Terrill said. It also requires public employers to verify the legal status of workers.