

OUR OPINIONS: Let's employ the law; The best way to stem the flood of illegal immigrants is to crack down on the companies that hire them

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Body

When politicians discuss immigration, they talk most often about securing the border and deciding what to do with those already here illegally. But comprehensive reform depends on whether Congress and the White House are also willing to get serious about stopping **illegal hiring**.

The border security bill that passed the U.S. House in December and the immigration-reform measure that came out of the Senate Judiciary Committee last week did demand stricter workplace enforcement. However, Washington hasn't talked much about spending the money needed to make that a reality.

At least in Georgia, which passed its own legislation last week, the state knows it will cost \$2.5 million to conduct 10,000 annual workplace audits, according to Labor Commissioner Michael Thurmond. If Gov. Sonny Perdue signs the new **law**, as expected, private employers who fail to document that they are **hiring** legal workers will get their tax deductions yanked. But the earliest enforcement could start would be 2009.

The legislation also requires **companies** holding state contracts to document that all of their workers are legal, a provision that will be phased in beginning next year with the largest **companies** coming under the rule first. However, the **law** exempts existing employees from the verification process, creating a de facto "amnesty" for **illegal** workers already here.

Nationally, the voluntary Basic Pilot program begun 10 years ago already allows employers to determine whether the Social Security number provided by a job applicant was actually issued to a legal worker of that name. The Senate workplace enforcement proposal would make use of that system mandatory within five years, a schedule that could be accelerated considerably if money were appropriated to quickly upgrade the system.

As it is, the Bush administration proposes to allocate only \$47 million for additional work-site enforcement next year, which would allow the **hiring** of an additional 171 special agents and 35 support staff members. In contrast, the Senate committee wants to nearly double the number of border patrol agents over the next five years from 12,000 to 23,000. In addition, the House wants to build a high-tech fence, at a cost of \$1 million per mile, along a 700-mile stretch of the border between the United States and Mexico.

Yet, at last count, the federal government **employed** fewer than 100 officers nationwide to **crack down** on **illegal** employers; last year, only 127 of the nation's more than 8 million employers were convicted for **hiring illegal** workers.

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And it's not just a question of money. The Social Security Administration can already identify those companies that routinely hire large numbers of workers whose Social Security numbers do not match their names. But federal law bars SSA from revealing that information to the Homeland Security Department, which enforces immigration law.

If Congress can appropriate hundreds of millions for fences and high-tech surveillance equipment to catch people who cross the border illegally, it can surely find more money to catch the companies that hire those illegal workers. All it lacks is the will to do so.

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