

Businesses dread an expansion of E-Verify

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Body

In an early indicator of how congressional Republicans will legislate on immigration, House GOP leaders are expanding an inquiry into an enforcement program that allows employers to check the immigration status of employees.

The **E-Verify** program has long been championed by Rep. Elton Gallegly (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee's immigration panel, which will hold a hearing on it Thursday.

Many **business** owners believe that Gallegly and other House Republicans want to make **E-Verify**, currently a voluntary program for companies, mandatory. Critics of such a move, many of them farmers, warn that it could destabilize the agricultural economy, which is heavily dependent on undocumented immigrants, and jeopardize millions of jobs held by American citizens that are upstream and downstream of farm labor.

Supporters of **E-Verify** say that, with minimal effort, the program ensures that jobs are filled only by U.S. citizens and those foreigners who are legally authorized to work.

After he was named chairman of the immigration subcommittee, Gallegly noted that "making **E-Verify** universally mandatory would ease the cumbersome and easily manipulated I-9 process employers now use to screen employees. It would also greatly reduce the number of illegal immigrants in the American workforce."

Gallegly was referring to the I-9 form, which employers must have job-seekers fill out. It requires documentation, such as a Social Security number, that the applicants are eligible to work in this country. With **E-Verify**, employers can run the information through federal databases to confirm it or identify people who are not legally authorized to work.

"I have a real mixed reaction from my members," said Randel Johnson, senior vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "Some find it workable, and others do not."

"With some companies, it is the logistical problem of having a computer on your construction site" to run the online queries, Johnson added. "If you are running a small **business**, there is aversion to a new system that will make things more complicated."

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The fast food company Chipotle Mexican Grill was recently asked to turn over I-9 information about employees [at 60 Washington and Virginia restaurants](#) to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. The chain was forced to fire suspected illegal workers at its Minnesota restaurants after a similar probe. Chipotle spokesman Chris Arnold said that restaurants in Arizona and the Carolinas currently use the **E-Verify** system and that the company is weighing whether to expand its participation in the program nationwide.

Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Tex.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said illegal workers are taking jobs that could help reduce unemployment among legal residents.

"With unemployment at 9 percent for 21 months, jobs are scarce and families are worried," Smith said. "According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 7 million people are working in the U.S. illegally. These jobs should go to legal workers."

Independent analyses of the **E-Verify** program by the Government Accountability Office and a Maryland research group known as Westat show that the overwhelming majority of those legally allowed to work in the country are quickly approved. A thriving market in fake Social Security numbers, however, means that the program fails to spot many undocumented immigrants.

To deter fraud, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency, which runs **E-Verify**, is increasingly using passports and employment-authorization documents that contain photo identification, said spokesman Chris Bentley. New efforts are underway, he added, to spot applicants who proffer fake driver's licenses.

But the elephant in the room is that significant portions of the U.S. economy depend on undocumented immigrants for labor, said Craig J. Regelbrugge, vice president of the American Nursery & Landscape Association.

"Simply put, any **E-Verify expansion** that comes without meaningful immigration reform would be disastrous for the American agricultural economy," he said. "It will leave the United States importing food and exporting jobs."

Smith disagreed. "Critics of **E-Verify** claim illegal immigrants hold jobs that Americans won't do. But even in the agriculture industry, where amnesty supporters insist we need illegal workers, 50 percent of the agriculture jobs are held by U.S. citizens and legal immigrants," Smith said. "And if farmers really need foreign labor, they can get it legally - we have a guest worker program for agricultural workers that has no numerical limit."

But at a telephone briefing organized by the pro-immigration National Immigration Forum, Regelbrugge said three in four farm jobs are filled by undocumented immigrants.

"Every lowly, backbreaking farm-working job sustains three jobs in the non-farm economy," he said. "What Congress needs to know is we have 1.6 million dedicated farmworkers, and if they go away, we will lose several million American jobs upstream and downstream. We happen to think that is too high a price."

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