

Facing long odds, Western growers hope to revive the agriculture-only portion of the bill

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Body

WASHINGTON - **Western growers** and union activists are scrambling for a fix after the comprehensive immigration **bill** on which they had pinned their **hopes** collapsed Thursday.

Facing long odds, some Westerners say they might try resurrecting an **agriculture-only portion** of the immigration package. The so-called AgJobs measure would legalize 1.5 million illegal immigrants who have a history of farm work.

"We're going to push it," vowed Manuel Cunha, the president of the Fresno-based Nisei Farmers League.

Like the larger immigration measure, the agriculture **bill** is complicated. As first introduced by Republican Sen. Larry Craig of Idaho in 2003, the legislation spanned 103 pages. Like the larger **bill**, it incites controversy over claims that it offers amnesty to lawbreakers.

The agriculture **bill**, though, targets a smaller population than the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants potentially affected by the comprehensive **bill**.

"I think AgJobs has potential," Democratic California Sen. Dianne Feinstein said Thursday. "I think we can move this because of the harvest coming up, and because of the fact that agriculture labor is way down now."

Special work visas

The **bill** would grant special visas to illegal immigrants who have worked in agriculture for the past several years and who continue to do so for three or more years. In time, the immigrants could convert their special visas to permanent U.S. legal residency and, eventually, citizenship.

The legalization provisions won the support of liberals, the United Farm Workers and church groups. In turn, groups such as the Nisei Farmers League, the Idaho **Growers** and Shippers Association and Florida's Indian River Citrus League signed on because of promised changes in an existing agricultural guest-worker program.

Last year, senators folded the provisions into the comprehensive immigration **bill**. But from the start, supporters including Craig and Feinstein retained the option of moving their **agriculture-only bill** separately if the larger **bill** died.

"We're going to start the discussion about this in the next two weeks," Cunha said. "We may be putting it onto another type of legislation; we don't think it can go alone."

As currently introduced, the separate agriculture **bill** has 29 Senate co-sponsors.

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In particular, lawmakers might try attaching this agriculture-only immigration package onto an appropriations bill used to fund the federal government. This is a popular technique, because appropriations bills enjoy momentum on Capitol Hill and must be passed to keep the government running.

Politically, there are some advantages in trying to move an agriculture-only immigration bill. There also are some disadvantages.

AgJobs supporters say they can sell their stand-alone bill as a discrete and manageable change, simpler to handle than the comprehensive bill that failed to win sufficient Senate support.

"I hope the Senate will work immediately to pass the non-controversial portions of this bill such as . . . AgJobs," Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said Thursday.

Fewer supporters

On the other hand, the larger bill's collapse took with it supporters who otherwise lack strong incentives to vote for an agricultural guest-worker plan. Some backers of comprehensive immigration restructuring also see benefit in holding on to the agricultural provision to ensure some rural votes.

An even more fundamental question, after the exhausting melodrama of the past several months, is whether lawmakers can revive any bill that contains the word "immigration."

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