

Easy immigration finds rough going

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Body

Washington --- The Bush administration's move to relax immigration rules for Mexicans, and possibly others, got off to a fast start. It won backing from a powerful alliance of business, seeking a larger, cheaper work force, and labor unions in search of more members. The U.S. Catholic Conference joined the effort by lobbying for broad amnesty for undocumented workers.

But a month later, the Bush plan is running into a wall of opposition.
Cox Washington Bureau

An estimate this week by the nonpartisan Urban Institute that as many as 8.5 million illegal immigrants are in the United States --- 2 million more than previously thought --- raises the stakes in Congress and in the nation's heartland, where resistance to immigration already was mounting.

The administration's detailed proposal, originally scheduled for release in September, has been delayed, perhaps for months.

Among supporters of the White House initiative --- described as a temporary-worker program to allow more Mexicans to work legally in the United States --- some of the early hopes for quick action are fading.

"I'm a little bit afraid that if they don't have something concrete fairly soon, they'll lose the momentum on this," said Theresa Brown, manager of labor and immigration policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a representative for a coalition of employers who are lobbying for more foreign workers. "And momentum is a very big thing in D.C."

Even among Texas Republicans, only Rep. Henry Bonilla has given the Bush immigration plan an enthusiastic endorsement. Others have ruled out amnesty for people who have entered the country illegally. That would be "rewarding lawlessness," Sen. Phil Gramm said.

Many Democrats, on the other hand, say the White House is not going far enough. Sen. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) wants a legalization process for illegal residents of all nationalities. "Immigrants are fueling our economy and enriching our society," he said.

The debate is moving beyond Washington. The nation has been altered by the arrival of more than 13 million immigrants over the past 10 years, according to census figures. Almost one in every 10 U.S. residents is foreign-born.

Construction firms, fast-food restaurants, poultry processors and meatpacking plants have benefited from the supply of foreign workers.

Most of the new arrivals are from Latin America.

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The newcomers are moving far inland, beyond states such as California, Texas and Florida. The influx has begun to bring major cultural shifts to the South, especially Georgia and the Carolinas, and to the traditionally homogeneous farm belt of the Midwest.

Six of the seven states with the nation's fastest-growing Latino populations in the 1990s were in the South, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Georgia's Latino population grew 300 percent from 1990 to 2000, a growth rate that trails only North Carolina, at 394 percent, and Arkansas, at 337 percent.

Latinos began arriving in Georgia in large numbers in the early 1990s. Many helped build venues for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. Others picked Vidalia onions in South Georgia; some came to dominate the work force in carpet mills in Dalton, poultry plants in Gainesville and construction crews in metro Atlanta.

The Census Bureau says 435,000 Georgians are Latino, about 5.3 percent of the state's total population, but other demographers say the real number is closer to 700,000. The Mexican Consulate in Atlanta estimates that half the Latinos in Georgia are illegal immigrants who could qualify for a legalization program.

The rapid growth of the immigrant population has spurred a growing network of activists who seek more restrictions on immigration: In once nearly all-white Iowa, Gov. Tom Vilsack backpedaled on his two-year drive to recruit immigrants to make up for his state's labor shortage. Some Iowans complain that schools are overburdened by students who don't speak English. Others say unskilled workers hold wages down. In a sign of the resistance, the Des Moines Register reported last month that a float in a Mason City parade carried the words: "In your 20s? Immigration will double U.S. population in your lifetime." In Rogers, Ark., where the Latino population swelled to 20 percent over the last decade, voters threw out a mayor who had welcomed the newcomers and replaced him with one pledging to crack down on illegal immigrants. After the city's police allegedly began stopping drivers who looked Latino, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund filed a lawsuit charging discrimination. In several states, activists are forming grass-roots groups, such as the Georgia Coalition for Immigration Reform, Floridians for a Sustainable Population and Carolinians for Immigration Reform. All seek restraints on immigration. Pro-restriction groups, which have been relatively quiet during the high-employment boom of the 1990s, are mobilizing for a national debate over immigration. The Federation for American Immigration Reform is planning a major public relations campaign, said associate director David Ray. At the Center for Immigration Studies, a private group that favors restrictions, chief researcher Steven Camarota has watched business and labor get behind the new push for what he calls "mass immigration."

"There's really only one group lined up against it, and that's the American people," Camarota said. He cited a March survey by the Gallup Poll, which indicated only 10 percent of the public favors increasing immigration, while 41 percent favor keeping the present level and 43 percent would reduce it.

Staff writer Mark Bixler contributed to this article.

ON THE WEB: Essential Worker Immigration Committee: www.ewic.org Center for Immigration Studies: www.cis.org

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