

BUSH WILL REVIVE PROPOSAL TO OVERHAUL IMMIGRATION

CHANGE COULD AFFECT MINNESOTA, GROWING LATINO BASE

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Body

President **Bush's proposal** today to **overhaul** the nation's **immigration** laws could help **Minnesota** meat processors and other employers gain the foreign workers they need and ease their way to citizenship in a state that is home to a fast-**growing Latino** population and an estimated 60,000 undocumented workers.

While details of the **Bush proposal** were sketchy, advocates said they welcome the attention on **immigration** reform. **Bush** had considered easing **immigration** laws shortly after taking office in 2001, but put the project on hold when the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks heightened concerns about border security.

Reforming **immigration** laws could serve national security and economic interests, said Jorge Saavedra, chief legal officer of Centro Legal in St. Paul, which provides legal services to needy Hispanics.

"The solutions, because they are so politically controversial, maybe are not easy, but it's important we get this back on the public policy agenda for debate," Saavedra said.

The value of undocumented labor in six **Minnesota** industries, including construction, meat processing and hotels, was estimated at \$1.56 billion in a study released in September 2000 by Minneapolis-**based** nonprofit Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment Through Research.

James Kielkopf, who wrote the HACER study, said that while the number of undocumented workers had continued **growing** since the study came out, the value of their labor likely had not **changed** because of the economic slowdown.

Minnesota had one of the country's fastest-**growing Latino** populations in the 1990s, rising 166 percent to 143,000. The total was estimated at 159,000 in July 2002, according to census figures. People of Mexican origin accounted for two-thirds of **Minnesota's** Latinos.

The state had an estimated 60,000 undocumented workers in 2000, according to U.S. Citizenship and **Immigration** Services statistics. **Immigration** experts estimate 8 million to 12 million foreigners are in the country illegally, with about half believed to have come from Mexico.

"We need to create a system for immigrant workers to come to the United States and fill this demand for labor without being a subclass of people, living in the shadows or living in fear or getting exploited when we've enjoyed the fruits of their labor," Saavedra said.

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In a bid to end decades of restrictive immigration policies, **Bush will** call for the creation of a guest-worker program that would open the borders to immigrants seeking low-skilled, low-wage jobs. The plan is expected to include provisions that would let illegal workers who already are here apply for legal status.

Past guest-worker programs have subjected immigrants to poor wages, unsafe working conditions and other forms of exploitation, Saavedra said. Instead, the United States should allow the workers to be free to seek out employers who offer the best deal. He suggested allowing workers to enter the country on time-limited visas for three to five years. If they comply with the law, pay taxes and stay out of trouble, they should be allowed to apply for more permanent status.

"I don't think you can close the door to citizenship," Saavedra said. "If we put in a system that allows immigrants to demonstrate their allegiance to the country and to demonstrate their contribution to their communities, then they should be able to enjoy the benefits of citizenship or permanent resident status."

That would acknowledge the workers and the contribution they have made to the economy, said Claudia Fuentes, executive director of HACER.

"You can't walk by any building being built and not hear Spanish language radio," Fuentes said. "I don't think that's because the workers want to learn Spanish that way. Maybe this will take some of those invisible hands and anonymous persons doing this work out of the shadows."

Bush's proposal has widespread support in the business community, especially among industries that depend on foreign workers, such as restaurants, agriculture and landscape services. Skeptics said the long-delayed White House plan seemed to be timed to help **Bush** with **Latino** voters in the November presidential election. It's also likely to improve **Bush's** relationship with Mexican President Vicente Fox, who will host **Bush's** two-day visit to Mexico next week.

Advocates on both sides said the outlook for congressional action would depend on how hard **Bush** pushes the **proposal**.

Administration officials insisted that enhanced border security and other **changes** since Sept. 11 have resolved security concerns about the proposed **immigration changes**.

Washington Bureau reporter Ron Hutcheson contributed to this report.

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Notes

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