

Plan to put Guard on border OK'd; Senate eagerly backs White House plan with 83-10 vote

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Body

WASHINGTON — The Senate, eager to stanch the flow of illegal immigrants, signaled overwhelming support Monday for President Bush's plan to dispatch National Guard troops to states along the Mexican border.

No tour of duty could last longer than 21 days, and troops would be excluded from "search, seizure, arrest or similar activity." They would support the Border Patrol, which has primary responsibility for intercepting illegal immigrants.

The vote was 83-10 on an amendment by Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., to authorize governors to order their states' National Guard units to perform annual duty training in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona or California. Administration officials have said Bush has the authority to deploy the Guard, making the vote a largely symbolic show of support.

The agreement came as the Senate moved toward an expected vote later this week on the most far-reaching immigration bill in two decades. The measure would strengthen border enforcement, create a guest-worker program and provide an eventual opening for citizenship to many of the millions of men and women already in the country illegally.

In contrast to the Guard-related provision, a proposal to assure identical wage floors for two groups of immigrant farm workers sparked a spirited debate.

Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., said farm workers who hold temporary visas should be paid along the same lines as up to 1.5 million future agriculture laborers under a new program envisioned in the legislation.

He said both groups should be paid whichever was higher, the minimum wage or the prevailing wage — a calculation that takes into account skill, experience and the geographical area where the job exists. "The workers (in the two groups) are mostly the same," Chambliss said, adding that most come from Mexico and are in the United States to earn money to support their families.

"Should they not be treated the same? I believe they should," he said.

Critics argued that Chambliss' proposal would result in a reduction in already low wages. "They'll be treated the same, but they'll be treated shabbily," said Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass. Other critics, including Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, said Chambliss' proposal would change a carefully negotiated compromise between farmers and groups advocating on behalf of migrant workers.

The amendment was sidetracked on a vote of 50-43.

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