

Defeat of amendment a win for farmworkers

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Body

As the Senate took steps to complete its debate on an immigration bill by the end of the week, lawmakers beat back efforts Monday to change a guest **farmworker** program strongly supported by California farmers and labor unions.

Also, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., introduced a measure meant to simplify the standards for legalizing most of the estimated 12 million undocumented workers in the United States.

The vote killing the **farmworkers amendment**, which opponents said would have made the program unworkable, gave added momentum to lawmakers who back the Senate's measure, which includes both a pathway to legal status for undocumented immigrants and a guest-worker program. By contrast, the House immigration bill, passed in December, focuses on enforcement and border security.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., took formal steps Monday to end debate and move to a final vote, which could come Wednesday or Thursday.

The differences between the Senate and House bills will have to be reconciled in meetings between members of both chambers. President Bush has strongly endorsed the Senate approach, but members of the House and some conservative senators strongly oppose it, raising questions whether a conference committee will be able to bridge the divide.

It is not clear when the conferees will meet, although some officials close to the process say the White House is pushing for next month.

Speaking in Chicago on Monday, Bush renewed his call for a civil discussion. "I'm very worried about the tone of this debate," he said.

The agriculture-worker **amendment**, offered by Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., would have changed wage rates in a program that is part of the overall immigration bill. Chambliss said his measure establishing a "prevailing wage" for immigrant **farmworkers** was fair to both the workers and their employers, but opponents said it would have cut wages precipitously. The vote was 50-43 to kill the **amendment**.

Feinstein's **amendment** on legalization would replace the system currently in the Senate bill, which uses the length of time an illegal immigrant has been in the United States to determine who is eligible for legal status.

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The bill now requires those in the United States less than two years to leave the country permanently. Those here between two and five years would have to return to their home countries and re-enter through a guest-worker program before applying for legal status. Those here more than five years could immediately enter a legalization process that would take an estimated 11 years to obtain citizenship.

Under Feinstein's plan, scheduled for a vote Wednesday, all undocumented immigrants who have been in the country since January 2006 and who meet certain criteria could apply for legal status.

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