

## Politics NATIONAL POLITICS

### Immigration bill expands

#### Senate panel OKs measure; two weeks of debate follow

By Michael Doyle -- Bee Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON - The Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday approved a comprehensive immigration overhaul that includes new guest-worker programs and the prospect of legal status for up to 12 million illegal immigrants already in this country.

By emphatic bipartisan margins, the committee went way beyond the border-security priorities favored by hard-line conservatives. The bill calls for more fences and Border Patrol agents - but also opens the door for hundreds of thousands of foreign guest workers. Those guest workers, as well as illegal immigrants already in the United States, eventually could find the path to U.S. citizenship under the bill approved Monday.

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"I think, considering all of the hurdles and pitfalls, that it's a good result," said Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., chairman of the Judiciary Committee. "I think we're making the best of a difficult situation."

The political difficulties will continue this week as the full Senate kicks off a two-week immigration debate. The bill will change. It also faces a very difficult confrontation with a competing House bill, which focuses solely on border protections and stringent law-and-order measures.

The Senate bill, by contrast, represents a triumph for Democrats, big-business Republicans and self-styled compassionate conservatives including President Bush, who spent Monday presiding over a naturalization ceremony.

Senators removed provisions making "illegal presence" a new misdemeanor. They added provisions allowing 400,000 non-farm guest workers a year to enter the United States, and during a six-year stay, to apply for permanent residency. Most dramatically, the committee would permit the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants now here to secure permanent residency after jumping through some hurdles that don't include returning to their native country.

"I have grave concerns," Texas Republican Sen. John Cornyn said. "I have a concern that this will be interpreted by my constituents as an amnesty program."

"Some folks should be able to stay here," said Arizona Republican Sen. John Kyl, "and others should not."

California agribusiness and farmworkers alike hailed the committee's approval of the immigration bill on

a 12-6 vote, with four Republicans supporting it. In particular, the strange-bedfellows alliance rallied behind an agricultural worker provision offered by Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

Once a skeptic, Feinstein on Monday won committee approval for a provision

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offering legal status to up to 1.5 million agricultural workers. Illegal immigrants who could prove they had worked in agriculture at least 150 days in the past two years could obtain a new blue card permitting U.S. residency.

"There is one industry in America that is almost entirely dependent on undocumented workers, and that is agriculture," Feinstein said. "There could be a legal work force for agriculture, which today there is not, and everyone knows there is not."

The farmworkers eventually could apply for a green card granting permanent legal U.S. residency. In time, they could then become U.S. citizens.

California Farm Bureau President Doug Mosebar said he was "encouraged" by the committee vote and that his organization will continue to lobby the full Senate and the Congress for what he called "a common sense" solution that includes legalization and guest worker visas.

The Rev. Sam Rodriguez of the Sacramento-based National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference also applauded the vote. "We are pleased with the outcome from the Judiciary Committee and we hope that when it goes to the entire Senate and then to conference with the House the outcome reflects what happened in the Judiciary Committee."

Larry Rohlfes, assistant executive director of the California Landscape Contractors Association, who was in Washington to lobby, said: "We think this is a big step towards our goal of good, reasonable comprehensive reform that makes sense."

But Jim Gilchrist, California-based founder of the Minutemen Project, which sends civilian patrols to the U.S.-Mexico border, vowed to fight legalization for undocumented immigrants. "We're going to threaten to replace any politician that had to do with the largest Trojan horse invasion in this country," he said.

Even in the flush of victory early Monday evening, immigration reform advocates conceded a collision between the House and Senate could put off any final bill until after the November election - if then.

"It's appalling because the Senate Judiciary Committee is repeating the mistake that Congress made 20 years ago ... when it granted amnesty to illegal aliens who were in the country at the time," Sen. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said on CNN after the vote.

Over the weekend, rallies in cities across the country drew hundreds of thousands of marchers opposing stricter border measures and supporting comprehensive bills that include legalization.

"The fight is not over yet," said Marc Grossman, Sacramento-based spokesman for the United Farm Workers. "We've got a long way to go."

Feinstein collaborated on the effort with Idaho Republican Sen. Larry Craig, who hovered throughout the committee room during much of Monday's seven-hour legislative drafting session. Three other Republicans on the committee - Sens. Mike DeWine of Ohio, Sam Brownback of Kansas and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina - joined with panel Democrats to support the measure.

Also hovering, outside the room, was Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, who had threatened to bring up his own border-enforcement bill today unless the committee finished its work. Frist, a potential 2008 presidential candidate, was not the only one maneuvering Monday. DeWine is facing a tough re-election fight this year, and Brownback is toying with a potential presidential bid.

Along with Graham, and at times Specter, they repeatedly joined with committee Democrats to fend off efforts by other GOP lawmakers to make the bill stricter.

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Setting up one big confrontation with the House, the Senate panel agreed to drop language that would have created the new misdemeanor crime of "illegal presence." Currently, an illegal immigrant caught within the U.S. interior can be deported, but this is only a civil matter. The House bill would create "illegal presence" as a felony.

"Somebody who is here contributing and working, I don't want to criminalize that," said Feinstein, who joined in the 11-6 vote stripping out the misdemeanor provisions.


Striking a similar contrast with the House, the Senate panel dropped severe language making it a crime to assist illegal immigrants. Instead, the panel agreed to exempt churches, organizations and individuals who are providing a wide array of humanitarian aid.

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