

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

March 16, 2006, 1:09AM

Border-security debate seen as threat to immigration law

Many fear time window won't be long enough to consider broader worker reforms

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WASHINGTON - Prospects for a comprehensive new immigration law suffered a setback Wednesday when Senate leaders moved to shorten preliminary work on the legislation and instead start debate on border security issues.

The decision by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., to begin two weeks of floor debate March 27 probably means the Senate will lack the time needed to finish a wider bill that would clarify the legal status of the millions of illegal immigrants in the United States.

The Senate is in recess next week, leaving only a scheduled session today by the Senate Judiciary Committee and a potential extra day of work Friday to refine a broader proposed law.

"It won't have any chance unless it comes out of committee with strong bipartisan support," said Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill.

Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, R-Pa, warned that without legislation honed by the committee to address the deepest issues, the Senate faces a legislative free-for-all. He is seeking more time.

"We have to get it done right, and we have to take the time we need, and getting it right means you can't do it fast," he said.

But Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, defended Frist's move to end committee deliberations, given the panel's struggle to find agreement about a guest worker plan for the illegal immigrants — a concept promoted by President Bush.

"It's complicated and that's the reason why we find ourselves in the mess we are in now," he said. "Even if you take a lot of time, you still might not be able to build consensus on it since people are so divided."

A major sticking point is whether to require illegal immigrants to return to their home countries before they can apply for a U.S. work visa.

Splitting the GOP, some social conservatives favor tighter immigration controls, perhaps with a reduction in the number of visas available, while the party's base of business groups wants more visas to guarantee a sufficient pool of low-wage workers.

Backers of a comprehensive bill are organizing rallies across the country, similar to one Wednesday on Capitol Hill. In the crowd was Bernie Thiel, who grows squash, onions, turnips and black eyed peas on his 1,000-acre farm in Lubbock. He estimated he lost \$125,000 to \$200,000 last year because of a shortage of workers.

"I hope these people understand the severity of this," Thiel said. "Try to sleep when you've got 40 acres of squash that got to be picked and you don't know if they're going to be."

With time running out, the judiciary panel planned to consider today a bill drafted by Specter and another by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., that would let the workers stay in the United States and hold jobs. McCain and Kennedy would also offer a path to citizenship.

Cornyn has proposed a temporary worker plan, similar to the approach Frist supports, that would require workers here illegally to return to their home countries after a five-year period and apply from there for green cards. Cornyn said it was still possible to produce a guest worker bill in the Senate.

In December, the House passed a border enforcement bill and blocked debate on temporary worker visas, arguing that any plan to allow workers to stay would be a form of amnesty.

Chronicle reporter Dirk VanderHart contributed to this report.