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Brothers in Congress Split on Immigration

By JUDITH KOHLER Associated Press Writer

(AP) - GREELEY, Colo.-Brothers John and Ken Salazar insist that there's no split between them on how the nation should deal with illegal immigration.

The fifth-generation Colorado Hispanics, who were elected to Congress two years ago, favor stronger border security and a guest-worker program for the country's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants. Both scoff at the notion of building a fence along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Yet, Rep. John Salazar was one of just 36 Democrats who voted late last year for a tough Republican-backed House bill that would make being in the country illegally a felony and proposed construction of the fence. His younger brother, Sen. Ken Salazar backs a Senate plan that would give law-abiding illegal immigrants a chance to earn U.S. citizenship.

The two, who grew up on a Colorado ranch and share a Washington apartment, reject suggestions of a family divide on an issue roiling the country. John Salazar said his vote was driven by political expediency.

"I really didn't like a whole lot about the bill," he said. "But I knew that we couldn't find neutral ground in the House. We needed to get it out and get a real debate in the Senate."

During a recent stop at a meatpacking plant in this northern Colorado city, Ken Salazar said, "I think we both want comprehensive immigration reform. We have a broken border."

John Salazar, 52, is caught in the political crosswinds of a controversial issue, midterm elections and the demographic reality of his 3rd Congressional District that encompasses rural and rich, from his hometown of San Luis Valley to Telluride, Colo.

The congressman is bracing for immigration-related fallout as he seeks a second term in a GOP-majority district that gave President Bush 56 percent of the vote in 2004. Even though Salazar voted for the House bill, he expects to take heat for supporting a guest-worker program.

Bob Loevy, a political science professor at Colorado College, said the Salazars have to walk a fine line between Democratic policy and their constituents in a GOP-leaning state that has twice backed Bush.

"The American public's opinion and public opinion in Colorado are also deeply divided on this issue," Loevy said.

Immigration proved to be an issue in John Salazar's first campaign. His Republican opponent, Greg Walcher, tried to portray Salazar as soft on illegal immigration because of his votes against a state bill that would have prohibited illegal immigrants from getting in-state college tuition.

He said his response now would be the same as it was then: Who is going to do the work others don't want to do?

Salazar faces Republican businessman Scott Tipton in the general election.

Ken Salazar, 51, has the political luxury of not having another election until 2010. The senator has his own critics. Outside Greeley City Hall, a small group backing tougher immigration laws gathered before Salazar's visit, waving signs and U.S. flags.

"Our citizens, American citizens, U.S. citizens are losing jobs to illegals, losing their homes, women winding up in cars with their families," said protester Joy Breuer, who works with a ministry for homeless people.

Ken Salazar said he has been surprised by some of the e-mails and letters he's received.

"The level of vehemence and anger against what we're trying to do in a comprehensive immigration reform package has reached a new height," he said. "I've never seen that level of attack before."

His brother was more explicit.

"I saw some of the hate mail he has received. They say he should go back to his own country," John Salazar said. "I find it amusing that people would even say such things when we've been here for five generations."

Salazars' ancestors helped settle Santa Fe, N.M., some four centuries ago. The congressman, who still works his family's land in southern Colorado, said he has heard from fellow farmers who can't find nonimmigrants to work long hours in the fields, even at \$14 an hour with housing provided.

His brother heard the same stories from dairy farmers while touring Colorado's northeastern plains during the recent congressional break.

"We talked about how out of 156 dairies here in Colorado, that without this labor force, they simply couldn't continue to produce the milk that we have on our tables every day," Ken Salazar said. "These are Republican Anglo-Saxon dairy farmers who say that they want an immigration reform package like the one that we put together in the Senate."

The Senate bill, which is stalled, would allow illegal immigrants to become U.S. citizens after meeting several conditions, including paying fines. Ken Salazar backs a measure requiring employers first to offer jobs to citizens at the prevailing wage before hiring guest workers.

John Salazar supports temporary work visas and penalties of some sort for entering the country illegally. He said turning illegal immigrants into felons, as the House bill calls for, goes too far. So does trying to deport millions of illegal immigrants or trying to build a border fence.

"People were telling me, 'If we get rid of all the 11 million (illegal) immigrants, send people back to Mexico, who's going to build the wall?'" John Salazar said.