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Bush Signs Bill Ordering Fence on Mexican Border

By DAVID STOUT

WASHINGTON, Oct. 26 — President Bush today signed into law a bill providing for construction of a 700-mile fence along the country's southwestern border. But he repeated his call for a far more extensive revamping of immigration laws.

"It is an important step toward immigration reform," Mr. Bush said at the signing in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. The bill is what most House Republicans wanted, but it is not what Senate Republicans, or the president, originally envisioned.

House Republicans, fearing a sharp backlash from voters worried about illegal immigrants, successfully resisted a broader immigration bill that was approved by the Senate last spring. That bill provided for a guest-worker program and eventual citizenship for immigrants, as well as border security.

But House Republicans disliked anything that smacked of "amnesty" for illegal immigrants, and they saw the Senate bill as embracing just that, no matter what its Senate backers and Mr. Bush said to the contrary.

Eventually, Mr. Bush realized that his desire for "comprehensive" immigration reform was dead, at least for this election year, so he bowed to political reality and embraced the border-security concept, at least for the time being. On Sept. 29, just before its members headed home to campaign, the Senate approved construction of 700 miles of fence. The House had passed the bill earlier in September.

"I want to thank the members of Congress for their work on this important piece of legislation," Mr. Bush said today, greeting several lawmakers by name. "Ours is a nation of immigrants. We're also a nation of law. Unfortunately, the United States has not been in complete control of its borders for decades, and therefore illegal immigration has been on the rise."

In addition to the fence, the bill Mr. Bush signed today provides for more vehicle barriers, checkpoints and advance technology to better secure the border with Mexico. But some of the bill's critics have wondered aloud whether the fence will really keep out people desperate to cross.

A separate homeland-security spending bill provided \$1.2 billion for the fence and accompanying technology advances.

As he signed the fence legislation, Mr. Bush repeated his call for an overhaul of immigration policy.

"We must reduce pressure on our border by creating a temporary worker plan," he said. "Willing workers ought to be matched with willing employers to do jobs Americans are not doing for a temporary - on a temporary - basis. We must face the reality that millions of illegal immigrants are already here. They should not be given an automatic path to citizenship. That is amnesty. I oppose amnesty."

"There is a rational middle ground between granting an automatic path to citizenship for every illegal immigrant and a program of mass deportation, and I look forward to working with Congress to find that middle ground," Mr. Bush said.

But Mr. Bush will almost surely have to work with a new Congress, a perhaps a changed political landscape, if he still wants "comprehensive" immigration reform.