

# Bush touts guest worker program proposal

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President Bush visited the U.S.-Mexico border Monday to tout a guest worker program for immigrants, pursuing a key domestic policy goal despite chilly relations with Congress.

The trip, a bookend to the visit that Bush made to the same southwest desert city last May, comes as tension rises over a new immigration proposal tied to the White House. Bush's team is privately working hard to rally votes for what Bush calls comprehensive reform — a mix of get-tough security with promises of fair treatment for undocumented residents.

Upon arriving in Yuma, Bush met Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. The two took a quick look at the "Predator," an unmanned plane that border officials use to monitor the region.

Bush pointed to two new layers of fencing that have been erected at the border since he visited the same spot a year ago.

"It's amazing the progress that's been made," Bush told border officials. "I was most impressed by your strategy, but more impressed by the fact that it's now being implemented."

Both Bush and the Democratic-run Congress are eager to show some accomplishment on a core issue like immigration. Yet, it's a sticky subject, and the fault lines don't necessarily fall along party lines. For Bush, opportunities to see through his domestic agenda are shrinking.

With up to 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., lawmakers haven't agreed on how to uphold the law without disrupting lives, eroding the work force and risking political upheaval.

Bush is hopeful for a legislative compromise by August. He was making his case at a point along the Yuma Sector Border, a 125-mile stretch overlapping Arizona and California. Bush hoped to send a message — particularly to conservative critics from his own party — that the stepped-up border enforcement is working.

So far this budget year, apprehensions of people crossing illegally in the Yuma Sector is down 68 percent, according to the White House. Bush credits that to the power of deterrence.

The president's relations with Congress these days have been soured by the war in Iraq. He is at odds with Democratic lawmakers over a bill to extend war funding in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Presidential spokesman Gordon Johndroe said that although war dominates the headlines, "there's a lot of quiet work that goes on underneath the surface, so that we can get some legislation done on issues like immigration."

Administration officials led by Chertoff and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez have been meeting privately for weeks with Republican senators. That expanded to a meeting in late March with key senators from both parties.

Out of that session, a work-in-progress plan emerged — one described as a draft White House plan by officials in both parties and advocacy groups who got copies of the detailed blueprint.

The White House disputes that characterization. Spokesman Scott Stanzel said it was only a starting point, an emerging consensus of Republican senators and the White House.

Regardless, the floated proposal has already met opposition. Thousands of people marched through Los Angeles on Saturday, spurred in part by what they called a betrayal by Bush.

The plan would grant work visas to undocumented immigrants but require them to return home and pay hefty fines to become legal U.S. residents. They could apply for three-year work visas, dubbed "Z" visas, which would be renewable indefinitely but cost \$3,500 each time.

Briefing reporters on Bush's flight to Arizona, Johndroe would not offer the president's position on the "Z" visas.

"There are a lot of proposals floating around out there," Johndroe said. "I don't want to negotiate from here. I'm going to let secretaries Chertoff and Gutierrez do that with members."

The undocumented workers would have legal status with the visas, but to become legal permanent residents with a green card, they'd have to return to their home country, apply at a U.S. embassy or consulate to re-enter legally and pay a \$10,000 fine.

That's far more restrictive than the bipartisan bill the Senate approved last year.

So far, Bush has only gotten part of what he wants — border legislation. He signed a bill last October authorizing 700 additional miles of fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The president has spent much of the last four days on vacation at his Texas ranch. He returns to Washington Monday after the Arizona visit.