

Chertoff Laments Immigration Failure

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By KEN MAGUIRE Associated Press Writer

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BOSTON — Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff told a national gathering of state lawmakers Wednesday that he would ratchet up enforcement of immigration laws, including at the workplace, in lieu of comprehensive immigration reform.

Chertoff, speaking at the National Conference of State Legislatures, lamented the failure of a bill that would have paved the way for millions of illegal immigrants to become citizens. That bill, supported by President Bush but opposed by conservative Republicans and some Democrats, failed on the Senate floor.

"We shouldn't have a patchwork of laws. We should be doing a comprehensive federal solution, but we haven't got that thing done," he said. "What I can tell you is we will certainly use every enforcement tool that we have, and every resource that we have available, to tackle the problem."

Chertoff, both in his speech and in a brief interview with The Associated Press, did not offer specifics of what he called "tool sharpening."

"We are currently looking at all of the tools that we have, without congressional action," he told The AP. "We're going to see where we can sharpen some of those tools up. We're going to throw everything that we have on the federal side into this issue of trying to address our immigration problem."

But on Friday, Homeland Security officials said they expect to soon announce new rules requiring employers to fire workers with questionable Social Security numbers. Employers would be notified when a worker's name or Social Security number is flagged by the Social Security Administration.

Employers who don't comply could face fines of \$250 to \$10,000 per illegal worker and incident.

Advocates for immigrants have been critical of enforcement, including raids on workplaces, saying they result in the separation of families.

"It's been tough sometimes because it's required disrupting families, and that's always an unpleasant thing to do, but we have an obligation to enforce the law," Chertoff said.

Vermont Rep. Linda Martin opposes workplace crackdowns in her state. She said Vermont farmers rely on foreign workers, most of whom are illegal, she said.

"We'd like to make it legal, and the farmers do, too," said Martin, Democrat who represents Lamoille County, near Stowe. "There are farms that are actually selling out because they cannot find help. They're not finding the average American wanting to work on a farm."

But Maryland Rep. Steven Schuh supported Chertoff's efforts.

"Employers who break the law and hire illegal laborers should be subject to enforcement action," said Schuh, a Republican from Anne Arundel County who said the top complaint from his constituents is illegal workers.

Chertoff also addressed the federal government's Real ID Act of 2005, which sets a national standard for driver's licenses and requires states to link their record-keeping systems to national databases.

Several states, including Georgia, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming, have balked at the requirements.

Chertoff said states opposed to Real ID do so at their own risk. Driver's licenses that fall short of the law's standards can't be used to board an airplane or enter a federal building.

"This is not a mandate. A state doesn't have to do this," he said. "But we've been very clear and the law is very clear, if the state doesn't have at the end of the day, the end of the deadline, Real ID compliant licenses, then that state cannot expect that those licenses will be accepted for federal purposes."

That state's residents would then have to rely on other forms of identification, such as a passport or military ID, he said.

"I recognize that may not seem like much of a choice," Chertoff said, but added the deadline for states to comply was extended to December 2009, with all citizens required to have the licenses by 2013.