

Crackdown called bad for business

Texas to see thousands of lost jobs, higher turnover, foes say

By Juan Castillo
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A new crackdown on the hiring of illegal immigrants will lead to the loss of 300,000 to 400,000 jobs in Texas in the next year, causing great harm to employers, workers and the economy, Bill Hammond, the head of the state association of businesses, said Wednesday.

But, with federal authorities set this week to announce the final version of a rule requiring employers to fire workers who use false Social Security numbers, other critics said the regulations will burden employers but won't prevent illegal immigrants, who often provide fake Social Security numbers, from getting jobs.

"The federal government can't do their job, and they're trying to pass it on to the private sector," said Harry Savio, executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Greater Austin. "Until Congress comes up with a legalized form of immigration and (national, fraudulent-proof IDs) this is going to be a problem."

Richie Jackson, chief executive officer of the Texas Restaurant Association, said fired employees will use the same false documents to get hired elsewhere, increasing employee turnover.

"And for any business, turnover is a very expensive proposition," he said.

"I'm peeved about this," said John McClung, president of the Texas Produce Association. "We are not permitted by law to question those documents."

Growers trade groups estimate that more than 70 percent of farm workers nationwide are illegal immigrants.

Meanwhile, groups asserting that the government isn't doing enough to enforce immigration laws hailed the hiring rules as long overdue.

"If you're going to have any immigration laws, you have to enforce them. Previously, we did," said Louise Whiteford, president of the Houston-based Texans for Immigration Reform, which counts about 400 members.

But opponents said an enforcement-only approach is unrealistic.

"It doesn't address the root problem of the immigration question, which is the need for legalization of people who are doing these jobs," said Cristina Tzintzún with the Austin-

based Workers Defense Project.

Tzintzún said the rules could lead to discrimination against legal residents and Latino workers.

No one knows for certain how many illegal immigrants work in Central Texas, but a prominent Texas economist, Ray Perryman, testified at the Capitol in March that about 1.5 million illegal immigrants live in Texas, representing about 6 percent of the work force.

He said undocumented workers are an integral part of the state's economy, Perryman said Wednesday that the crackdown puts employers in a difficult situation.

"Obviously, they're needing the workers, and yet they're being penalized," Perryman said. "I would like to see us move into a situation where we could use these workers in a legal and open and appropriate manner."