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# **G.O.P. in Senate Narrows Immigration Focus to 700-Mile Fence**

By CARL HULSE

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20 — Senate Republicans formally put aside a broad immigration overhaul sought by President Bush on Wednesday and decided instead to press ahead with narrower bills to require building 700 miles of fence on the southwestern border.

Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee, the majority leader, said the fate of millions of illegal immigrants already in the United States had become a “fundamental sticking point” in trying to reach agreement with the House on a broad bill.

Mr. Frist said the fence proposal, which the House has passed, was the best alternative if lawmakers wanted to salvage some immigration changes before the Nov. 7 elections.

“Let’s focus on a problem the American people understand,” the senator said, “and that is, we have hundreds of thousands of people coming across our border every year into our country.”

He added that the broad measure could be considered when Congress returned in mid-November or next year.

The Senate voted, 94 to 0, to debate the measure on fencing and other border barriers at the cost of billions of dollars. But the fate of even that measure is unclear, because members of both parties have reservations, and Mr. Frist may need to block any amendments if he wants to deliver it to Mr. Bush before Congress adjourns next week.

The fence represents one element of the broad bipartisan measure that the Senate approved in May after Mr. Bush had delivered a prime-time address calling for sweeping changes in immigration law, including allowing some illegal immigrants to earn citizenship. House Republicans, fearing a backlash from the right, refused to consider any bill that could be called amnesty for illegal immigrants.

The two chambers never formally opened negotiations to reconcile the Senate bill with a strict border enforcement measure that the House approved in December.

Republican backers of the broad Senate approach suggested that the party could be penalized at the polls for not pursuing a comprehensive solution.

“It is one of the greatest problems facing the country today,” Senator Arlen Specter, the Pennsylvania Republican who is chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said. “For the Republicans not to produce is not good. Perhaps we will find a little better mood in the lame-duck session.”

Other Republicans said constituents were demanding that the government do a much better job of sealing borders before considering other aspects of an immigration overhaul like a temporary-worker program, new penalties for businesses that employ illegal immigrants and possible citizenship.

“This is putting the horse before the cart,” Senator Rick Santorum, Republican of Pennsylvania, said about moving ahead with just the fence proposal.

The House passed its fence bill last week and is considering other enforcement measures this week in an effort to show that lawmakers are making progress on immigration. On Wednesday, the House voted, 228 to 196, to require voters to show proof of citizenship, a step that Republicans said would limit illegal immigrants’ voting.

Democratic critics said requiring government-issued identification would amount to a modern poll tax that would discourage minorities and older Americans from voting. The House and Senate have previously voted in favor of building barriers along the border with Mexico. The proposal calls for two strips of concrete separated by a road along with cameras and other surveillance equipment at five locations. "I'm convinced that physical barriers at the border, fencing in particular, are important," said Senator Jeff Sessions, Republican of Alabama.

Mr. Sessions said he was worried that Congress might approve the fence but not provide the money to build it. The Senate had previously added \$1.8 billion to a Pentagon spending measure for the fence, a bill that is pending.

Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic leader, said the fence could cost \$7 billion or more.

"We can build the tallest fence in the world, and it won't fix our broken immigration system," Mr. Reid said. "To do that, we need the kind of comprehensive reform that the Senate passed earlier this year."

The fence measure, which may not come to a vote in the Senate until next week, is drawing scrutiny from some border-state Republicans who worry that it would impose too many requirements on local governments involving locating the fence.

Senator Larry E. Craig, Republican of Idaho, is considering offering a plan to allow more agricultural workers to enter the country. Mr. Craig said a continuing crackdown on illegal immigrants along the Mexican border was leaving growers in the West short of workers.

"Fruit is not being picked; vegetables are not being harvested," Mr. Craig said.

A bipartisan group recommended on Wednesday overhauling the immigration system to make it more responsive to the demands of the labor market. After more than a year of research, the group recommended creating expedited visas for workers of all skill levels who have legal employment offers.

The group was led by former Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, a Republican who is also a former senator from Michigan, and former Representative Lee H. Hamilton, the Indiana Democrat who was vice chairman of the Sept. 11 Commission.

The director of the bipartisan group was Doris M. Meissner, who was commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service under President Bill Clinton.

Throwing its support behind proposals passed by the Senate, the group called for "an earned path to permanent legal status" for an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants now living in the United States as "an essential element" of reform.

The panel called for federal aid to states to allay the costs of the legalization program, and it called on the White House to name an immigration coordinator and to focus on disrupting terrorists' travel with the same vigor it had brought to tracking terrorists' communications and finances.

Julia Preston contributed reporting.