

March 9, 2006, 5:59PM

New immigration chief says U.S. to be ready for guest workers

By ANABELLE GARAY
Associated Press

DALLAS — The new director of the nation's immigration service said Thursday that the agency should get through a backlog of immigrant petitions in time to handle a guest worker program if it is approved. "We hope to have, quite frankly, the backlog taken care of before we inherit another program," said U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Director Emilio Gonzalez said during a teleconference.

The Senate Judiciary Committee has been debating a guest worker program that would give temporary worker status to immigrants.

But that would greatly increase the workload of the agency already facing a backlog that has left some immigrants waiting up to 2 1/2 years for citizenship or "green cards" providing permanent residence status.

The Bush administration has set an Oct. 1 deadline for the backlog to be eliminated by the agency, which processes applications for citizenship, permanent residence, work permits and other immigration documents.

To prepare for the possibility of a guest worker program, officials have been looking at facilities, staffing, and outsourcing, something the agency currently does with immigrant fingerprinting and photographing.

"We are as prepared as we can be now, considering there is no bill," Gonzalez said.

Changes under way at Citizenship and Immigration Services will accelerate its processing time, Gonzalez said. The agency is moving toward paperless system by establishing electronic accounts for applicants and working to create new forms to improve cross referencing.

CIS also plans to continue expanding fast-paced processing programs like one in Dallas, where immigrants seeking "green cards" are screened in person and their cases are typically resolved within months.

The El Paso field office is likely to house one of the programs, since it doesn't have a backlog, Gonzalez said.

Since Gonzalez took over Jan. 4 after being confirmed in December, he has put a priority on eliminating the backlog, preparing for a temporary worker program and examining the budget.