

Senate panel adds immigration measure to Iraq supplemental

By Manu Raju

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The Senate Appropriations Committee on Thursday added to an Iraq spending bill a controversial provision to help pave the way for undocumented agriculture workers to win legal status, a move that may reopen the divisive immigration debate on the Senate floor.

The so-called Ag-Jobs amendment, sponsored by Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Larry Craig (R-Idaho), would create a process that allows undocumented workers to continue to work on farms. Without the amendment, Feinstein warned that the U.S. would lose \$5-9 billion to foreign competition, tens of thousands of farms would shut down and 80,000 workers would be transferred to Mexico. The bill would sunset in five years.

"Agriculture needs a consistent workforce," Feinstein said. "Without it, they can't plant, they can't prune, they can't pick and they can't pack.

"This is an emergency situation," she added.

The amendment was approved by a 17-12 vote with defections from both parties. Critics say the amendment amounts to amnesty for people who entered the country illegally. A broader comprehensive immigration overhaul, with a path for citizenship for the nation's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants, failed in a divisive Senate vote last year.

"No matter how one characterizes it, this enormous amendment still amounts to amnesty," said Chairman Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.). "I oppose amnesty. All these immigration issues should be addressed through the regular order."

The committee is moving Thursday to approve three separate measures: one to fund domestic priorities; another to provide \$169 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and a third to alter President Bush's war policy.

The Senate plans to take up the bills next week, and is likely to reject the war policy measure, but will likely approve the funding for the wars.

It is unclear whether Democrats have the votes to approve the domestic-spending provision since a number of Republicans want to add their priorities. The measure remains one of the few vehicles likely to get enacted before the election in November. The addition of a slew of amendments could doom its prospects in the Senate.