

Lawmakers approve tweaks to Alabama immigration law

Kelli Dugan

Reuters

10:46 PM CDT, May 16, 2012

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - Alabama lawmakers passed a new bill to revise the state's controversial immigration law on Wednesday, hoping to fend off more legal challenges to the toughest state measure on immigration in the United States.

The bill, whose final approval now rests with Alabama's governor, largely keeps intact a law approved last year that has sparked lawsuits by the Obama administration and immigrant rights groups who argue it is unconstitutional.

Businesses in Alabama, especially farmers, have also protested the law, known as HB 56, saying it has led to widespread departures of Hispanic workers from the state and created a labor shortage.

Lawmakers in the state House of Representatives voted 68-37 to approve the revised bill hours after it passed the Senate. Both chambers are controlled by Republicans.

Alabama Republicans who support the immigration law say it will help create jobs for legal residents by driving out undocumented workers and their families.

The changes to the law include a new provision allowing the Department of Homeland Security to publish on a quarterly basis the names of illegal immigrants who appear in court on charges of violating state law whether they have been convicted or not.

Proponents of the changes said they hoped the revisions would clarify and strengthen some portions of the law that face legal scrutiny.

But the bill leaves unchanged many key components, including requirements that police check the immigration status of anyone they detain and suspect of being in the country illegally.

The law also makes it a felony for illegal immigrants to apply for or renew driver's licenses, identification cards or license plates.

Critics of the bill said the revisions would do little to make substantive changes to the law, which they say has resulted in discrimination and encouraged police racial profiling.

"We saw this legislative session as an opportunity for our lawmakers to do the right thing and right the wrongs that HB56 created," said Zayne Smith, an immigration policy fellow with the Alabama Appleseed Center, a nonprofit policy and legal advocacy organization. "Unfortunately, that did not happen."

Several U.S. states have passed laws cracking down on illegal immigrants, charging U.S. President Barack Obama and the U.S. Congress have failed to act on the issue. An estimated 11.2 million illegal immigrants live in the United States and how to deal with them is a contentious political issue.

Last year, Alabama's immigration law led police to detain two foreign employees in the state's important auto industry for failing to produce proof of legal residency.

The workers - a German Mercedes Benz executive and a Japanese employee at Honda - were released without charges after the governor's office intervened on their behalf.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit, based in Atlanta, has ordered the state to stop enforcing certain provisions of the original law.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-usa-alabama-immigrationbre84g05v-20120516,0,7343401.story>