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GOP to target employers who hire illegal workers

By Kitty Felde

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Migrant farm workers from Mexico finish a long day of harvesting organic vegetables at Grant Family Farms on Sept. 3, 2010 in Wellington, Colo. The farm hires some 250 immigrant workers during the peak harvest season. Owner Andy Grant lamented that the issue of illegal immigration has become politicized nationally. 'They feed America,' he said of immigrant workers. 'They should not be victimized.'

The new Republican-led House has scheduled its first hearing on immigration issues this week. The GOP has shifted its focus from border enforcement to workplace crackdowns.

In the past, when New York GOP Congressman Peter King and other Republicans talked about immigration, the issue was border security. King suggested "more National Guard troops," as well as "more radar detection and sensors at the border."

But speaking in December on Fox News, the new chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee added another issue: worksite enforcement.

"Carry out raids on factories and companies that are hiring illegal immigrants because that's the magnet," he said. "That's what draws them across the border, knowing that there are jobs available. If they see that we're going to strictly enforce our immigration laws, then you're less likely to see people taking the risk coming across the border."

Republican Congressman Brian Bilbray of San Diego, who heads the House Immigration Reform Caucus, agrees. He said it's time to go after what he called "illegal employers."

"Let's focus on the real source of the problem, which is not the border," he said. "It is the employers who are exploiting illegal labor to drive the fair market value of legal labor down."

Bilbray said he thinks that's something on which labor unions, conservatives, liberals and independents can agree.

On Wednesday, the House Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement will hold its first hearing on whether the federal government's worksite enforcement is - in its own words - "up to the job."

Marielena Hincapie heads the National Immigration Law Center. She said "members of the immigration subcommittee who purport to now push immigration enforcement-only measures as a means to secure jobs, they're merely interested in pushing mass exportation agenda."

She wants broad immigration reform that includes a policy to let many of the estimated 12 million undocumented stay here. Comprehensive reform is unlikely in a GOP-led House.

But Frank Sharry, who heads the immigration reform group "America's Voice," said what he calls "immigration extremism" could be "slow motion political suicide" for Republicans.

"They cannot continue to demonize the fastest group of new voters in this country without electoral consequences," said Sharry.

He predicts more moderate Republicans in the Senate will offer an alternative to tougher immigration policies coming out of the House.

Last month, the Senate debated the Dream Act, the measure that offered legal status to college students and members of the military who'd come to the US illegally when they were children. But even with a larger Democratic majority, the Senate failed to pass what most saw as the most politically palatable immigration reform measure.