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national politics

Salazar gets key immigration seat

By [Anne C. Mulkern](#)
Denver Post Staff Writer

Washington - Sen. Ken Salazar is now a key player in the Congressional tug of war over immigration legislation.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has asked Salazar, a Colorado Democrat, to sit on the committee that would unify any immigration bill the Senate passes with one the House passed last year.



U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo. (Post / Craig F. Walker)

"It's an opportunity to work on one of the most pressing matters of national security for our country," Salazar said.

"This is a big issue," Salazar said. "It's a big issue in our country. It's a big issue for Colorado. It would be a good thing for me to be able to participate in the conference."

It's an unusual opportunity for a freshman senator, one that will put him in what's likely to be a near war-room. Many House Republicans oppose any legislation that would grant legal status to illegal immigrants.

Salazar has not yet sat on a conference committee. Members are normally appointed by seniority.

Reid asked Salazar as he was putting together a deal with Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn. that allows the bill to come up for debate. Immigration legislation languished for more than a month because the two leaders couldn't agree on the parameters for debating the legislation, and what would happen to it once it's passed.

Reid wanted to protect provisions Democrats support, such as a guest worker program and a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. He believed the best way to do that would be to have a say in who shapes the final legislation that goes to the president, said Reid spokesman Jim Manley.

"He brings

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an important voice to the debate," Manley said of Salazar. "He's from a western state, obviously of Hispanic heritage. He's been active in the debate so far."

Salazar said he wants to make sure the final package deals with border security, enforcement of current laws, and what he calls "the reality of the 11 million undocumented workers in this country."

If the Senate passes a bill and he sits in the conference committee, Salazar said, "I would work closely with my Republican colleagues in the Senate to convince our House colleagues about our product."

"If we can get to a bill that has a good margin of victory in the Senate, I think we'll have a good shot at getting something out of the conference committee that is similar to what we get out of the Senate," he said.

Asked if he'd be willing to sacrifice the guest worker program and pathway to citizenship for a merged bill that just beefs up border security, Salazar demurred.

"You can't deal with the issue of immigration in an effective way unless you do it in a comprehensive manner," he said. "Efforts on immigration reform that have been done by only looking at one part of it or another ... it didn't resolve the problem."

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