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Senate Refuses to Cut Guest Workers From Immigration Measure

May 16 (Bloomberg) -- The Senate refused to eliminate a guest-worker program from legislation overhauling U.S. immigration policy, rejecting the argument of lawmakers who said the workers would reduce wages and take jobs from Americans.

The Senate voted 69-28 to set aside North Dakota Democrat Byron Dorgan's proposal to eliminate a provision creating up to 325,000 visas each year for unskilled workers from other countries. "The guest-worker provision is about importing cheap labor," Dorgan said before the vote.

Republican Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania opposed Dorgan's measure, saying if the U.S. doesn't provide for guest workers who can fill the needs of the American economy, then we're going to create a vacuum of a situation where illegal immigrants will come into fill those needs."

The vote today was on one of about 20 amendments the Senate will consider as it debates immigration legislation that would strengthen border security, create a new guest-worker program and allow many of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants to apply for legal status.

President George W. Bush, in a prime-time televised address last night, said he favors "comprehensive" legislation that addresses border security, guest workers and undocumented immigrants. Bush said he will send 6,000 National Guard troops to the U.S.-Mexican border and endorsed giving undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. "for many years" a way to apply for citizenship.

70 Senators

Senator Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican, said that Bush's speech will help the final legislation pass the Senate with the support of about 70 of the 100 senators. A majority that large will strengthen the position of Senate negotiators when they meet with members of the House of

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Representatives in a conference committee to craft a final measure.

Legislation passed by the Senate will have to be reconciled with a House measure passed last year that focuses on border security and the hiring of undocumented workers, and does not address a work program or legalization of undocumented immigrants.

`` Momentum in the Senate creates opportunity in conference with the House," Graham said.

The Senate earlier today rejected, by a vote of 55-40, an amendment sponsored by Georgia Republican Johnny Isakson that would have required the president to certify that border-strengthening measures in the legislation were put in place before any system was established allowing undocumented immigrants to seek citizenship.

` A Wink and a Nod'

Isakson said the failure to adopt his amendment gives `` a wink and a nod one more time to those who would come here illegally."

Opponents said the amendment would undermine the legislation's goals of addressing security and immigration issues at the same time.

`` We cannot deal with this issue of immigration reform in a piecemeal matter," said Democratic Senator Ken Salazar of Colorado.

The Senate adopted, by a vote of 79-16, Salazar's competing amendment to delay implementation of a guest-worker program or legalization for undocumented immigrants only until the president certifies the proposals ``strengthen the national security of the United States."

The Senate is also likely to consider amendments that will bar felons in the country illegally from gaining legal status, require employers to advertise jobs to Americans before foreign employees can gain permanent residency, and call for additional fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican, has said the Senate will complete work on the measure by the end of the month.

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