

Congress' unfinished agenda

OUR OPINION: IMMIGRATION REFORM CAN IMPROVE ECONOMY, SECURITY

Editorial
The Miami herald
Sep. 05, 2006

America is at a crossroads on immigration. Despite increased border enforcement, the number of undocumented immigrants in the country has risen to 12 million and grows by more than 400,000 a year. This won't change unless Congress creates legal ways to accommodate demand for foreign unskilled labor. The time to start is today, as members of Congress return from their Labor Day hiatus.

Reform is critical to keeping the U.S. economy healthy and the nation secure. Yet Congress has done little since May when the Senate passed its version of comprehensive reform. House leaders spent the August recess staging 21 field hearings trying to pump up support for their enforcement-only measure. The gambit didn't work. Instead, they found popular support for broader reform.

The House and Senate should begin reconciling their widely divergent bills. Even if they can't agree before the November elections, discussion must begin now. The House bill, HR 4437, would criminalize and deport all undocumented immigrants. The Senate bill, S 2611, would toughen border protection and employer enforcement -- but it also includes guest-worker provisions and offers immigrants a chance to earn legal status.

One new idea by Rep. Mike Pence, R-Ind., could be a conversation starter. He suggests requiring undocumented immigrants to return to their home country, even if briefly, to apply for a guest-worker visa that would allow them to return the United States legally. After 17 years here, the guest worker could apply for permanent status. This program wouldn't start until tougher border controls were in place. Yet even this stringent proposal is being criticized as amnesty and too generous.

President Bush, thankfully, is still promoting comprehensive reforms, including finding a solution for the millions of productive people who, realistically, can't all be deported. He points out that it isn't "amnesty" when immigrants are required to work, pay fines and back taxes, pass a security check and learn English in order to earn legal status, as the Senate plan demands. Bringing immigrants out

of the shadows in this way will allow the nation to focus resources on terrorists and other criminals, within U.S. borders and outside of them.

Yes, Congress should beef up border security and employer enforcement. But that alone won't stop illegal immigration or ensure national security. Lawmakers also have to create legal channels for immigrants who fill jobs that Americans can't or won't do. The law must be realistic to be enforceable.

Comprehensive reform is the best way to fix immigration, protect the U.S. economy and secure our borders.