

In Texas, Frustration Over Senate Impasse

Collapse of Immigration Bill Concerns Region That Relies on Foreign Workers

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WESLACO, Tex. -- On the front line of securing the nation's borders, the day after the collapse of a major overhaul of the nation's immigration laws was business as usual -- but better.

For the first time in four years, this Border Patrol station near the southern tip of [Texas](#) had an infusion of agents. Eleven freshly graduated officers from the agency's training academy had arrived as [the U.S. Senate](#), 1,800 miles away, debated the immigration bill that ultimately stalled. The new agents were the first of 100 allocated to this station, just north of the [Rio Grande](#). They are one small -- but to this outpost, key -- piece of the Bush administration's multiyear plan to hire 6,000 new patrol agents, tighten border security and step up enforcement against illegal immigration.

"This is absolutely good news for us," said Patrol Agent in Charge J.R. Villarreal, as he watched the rookies take apart and clean M4 rifles. As for the comprehensive immigration legislation:

"That's a mess; that's politics," he said.

"You're talking to somebody who heard [Ronald Reagan](#) talk about immigration reform when I was starting as a young buck," said Villarreal, 43, who began his career in 1986, the year Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which granted amnesty to some 3 million illegal immigrants, created sanctions for employers who hired undocumented workers, established a temporary visa program for agricultural workers and provided funding for more border agents.

"They were going to clear the clutter to allow the agents to have more time to patrol the border. The border was going to be more secure, and we weren't going to be as tied up dealing with illegal aliens," he said. "I'm just glad to have more manpower. The rest takes time."

The bipartisan Senate measure that stalled late last week would have, once again, tightened border security, cracked down on the hiring of illegal immigrants and provided a path for such immigrants to stay and work legally in the [United States](#). The legislation died when the Senate voted to end a new guest-worker program after five years.

The bill, and in particular the proposal for the guest-worker program, were watched closely by South Texans. Many of them are worried about labor shortages in the service industry and in the region's multibillion-dollar produce industry.

"If we cannot get labor in this country because Congress is incapable of passing intelligent legislation, some people will struggle along, some will go out of business, and many will move production to [Mexico](#)," said Texas Produce Association President John McClung of Alamo, in South Texas.

Already, 50 percent of Texas fruit and vegetable distributors contract with Mexican farmers across the border to plant and harvest produce that is then shipped across the United States, he said.

"People have to understand that a significant amount of fruits and vegetables is going to be planted and tended and harvested by Mexicans," McClung said. "The question is only what side of the border is that going to happen on."

J Allen Carnes, whose family has farmed fruit and vegetables on 3,000 acres for more than half a century in Uvalde, in southwest Texas, said the company has traditionally depended on Mexican fieldworkers with various forms of legal work visas.

But recent security crackdowns have made it more difficult for those workers to cross the border or travel within the region. And fewer migrant workers from South Texas are coming up, for fear of immigration enforcement raids, Carnes said.

Last year the Carnes farm had to leave produce unpicked in the field for the first time because of a 20 to 30 percent shortage of farmhands. This year, the labor shortage is 40 to 50 percent, Carnes said.

"Everybody would agree we have a problem with illegal immigration," he said. "There are 12 million illegals, employers that need employees, law enforcement agencies screaming for help -- but still the political posturing back and forth."

The bill's collapse in the Senate "was pretty disheartening," Carnes said. "This country has a real problem when it can't fix its problem."

The Texas Border Coalition, created by government and business officials from [El Paso](#) to [Brownsville](#) (with 1,200 miles of border in between), has also been lobbying for a guest-worker program, a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants, and more personnel and technology at ports of entry to make the crossing process for legal immigrants more efficient.

"An enforcement-only policy just doesn't work," said Eddie Aldrete, a senior vice president of International Bank of Commerce in [San Antonio](#) and vice chairman of the border coalition.

"The biggest issue in a post-9/11 world has been a rush to seal the borders and close off this country. But you can't have homeland security without economic security," Aldrete said. "You have to also protect the ability to grow. The issue is having enough visas for the amount of workers that we need. By doing that, you take the pressure off the Border Patrol. A fence and militarizing the border is only dealing with the symptom to the problem."