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Plan for guest workers -- but no citizenship guarantee -- emerges

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. Arlen Specter, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, unveiled an immigration reform bill Friday that would create a guest worker program and give legal status -- but not guaranteed citizenship -- to the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants already in this country.

Specter released a draft of his immigration proposals as the Senate prepares to return to Capitol Hill next week.

The Judiciary Committee is expected to take up reform legislation Thursday.

Specter's proposals received a mixed reaction from lawmakers, who are struggling to balance calls for increased security with demands by business interests for affordable labor.

"I am encouraged by the consensus behind the call for reform," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who has introduced a bill calling for stiffer measures to combat illegal immigration and improve border security.

In a letter accompanying the proposal, Specter described his bill as a starting point for debate.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., said he wants a debate on an immigration bill before the full Senate by March 27, although lawmakers say that deadline could slip in the weeks ahead.

A House bill passed before Congress adjourned last year contains provisions that include building 700 miles of fence along the U.S.-Mexico border, deporting undocumented immigrants and the elimination of birthright citizenship.

Republicans in the House rejected a guest worker plan -- proposed by Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz. -- which some described as an amnesty program for undocumented immigrants.

Specter's bill includes a guest worker plan, and one Flake said made the senator's bill "an encouraging step towards achieving comprehensive reform."

"Chairman Specter's bill recognizes that enforcement alone will not alleviate our country's illegal immigration troubles," Flake said.

The Specter bill would require temporary workers to return after six years and doesn't provide an avenue for citizenship, unlike a guest worker program proposed by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass.

President Bush has made passage of a guest worker program a priority. Another provision in the Specter bill would legalize the undocumented immigrants now living in the United States, but wouldn't allow them to become permanent citizens.

Hispanic and immigrant rights groups said the citizenship provision was a non-starter.

"We couldn't possibly support a proposal that says you can work here, but you can never be apart of our society," said Cecilia Munoz of the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Latino rights group.

Opposition came from those who seek strict limits on legal immigration and a crackdown on undocumented workers.

Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., the chairman of the House Immigration Reform Caucus, said the bill was an "unmitigated disaster" because of its guest worker and border security provisions.

"Waving the white flag and retreating from the border is no solution to our immigration woes," Tancredo said. "Apparently, Specter thinks that if we make illegal behavior legal, our border security problems will go away."

Other critics said Specter, in trying to please everyone, pleases no one.

"It is hard to see how this bill can win enough support to move forward in the Senate, and hard to see how it can work on the ground to solve the problem of illegal immigration," said Tamara Jacoby with the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, an economic think tank.

"The good news is that it is only a first draft," she said.

Lawmakers said they would begin next week to make changes before it reaches the full Senate for debate.

"No one person has a monopoly on good ideas and we have to find a way to pass these reforms of our broken system," Cornyn said.

The Specter bill calls for 1,250 new Border Patrol agents over the next five years, far below the 10,000 new agents the Cornyn bill seeks over the same time frame.

Cornyn also seeks \$500 million a year for five years for new technology to enhance security, far more than the increases sought by Specter.

The Specter bill would require the Homeland Security Department to determine whether a fence would be practical along the southern and northern borders, and would increase the number of work visas or "green cards" from 140,000 to 290,000.

Business groups have urged Congress to create a guest worker program and increase green card visas to supply labor to critical industries with jobs that many Americans won't take.

"It is critical that any immigration reform focus on our economic security as well as our border security," said Richie Jackson, the Texas Restaurant Association chief executive officer.

"Without a competitive workforce, restaurants will be unable to fill essential jobs," Richie said.

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Senate Immigration bill proposals

--Create guest worker program to give legal status to 11 million people illegally living in the U.S., but not allow them to become citizens

--Require temporary workers to return home after six years

--Increase the number of 'green cards' from 140,000 to 290,000

--Add 1,250 new Border Patrol agents over the next five years

--Add \$500 million a year for five years for new technology to enhance border security