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Fears drive immigration bill debate

Unease with Mexicans noted as Senate takes up the issue.

By Susan Ferriss -- Bee Staff Writer

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As the U.S. Senate wades this month into the divisive task of reforming immigration law, dual U.S. and Mexican citizen Juan Hernandez is prompted to remember his grandmother.

In the 1950s, Hernandez says, his Anglo mother married a man she met in Mexico, and her mother in Texas refused to talk to her new son-in-law for 10 years. She left the room whenever he entered, but finally, one day she began to stay - and she grew to love the foreign-born son-in-law who helped nurse her through the twilight of life.

"We fear the unknown," said Hernandez, a former Texas college professor who served in Mexican President Vicente Fox's Cabinet and defends his old boss's position that it would be "win-win" for the United States to admit more Mexican workers.

Hernandez, who lives in Fort Worth, just published a first-person book to influence the immigration debate called "The New American Pioneers: Why Are We Afraid of Mexican Immigrants?" Like his grandmother, Hernandez said, Americans seem to resist embracing Mexico as a partner in a world that is dividing into economic blocs like the European Union.

That resistance makes it more difficult to find solutions to illegal immigration, which is fueled mostly by Mexicans that U.S. employers say they need to fill labor shortages.

This week the Senate Judiciary Committee is scheduled to debate historic proposals, including a proposal to offer work visas to some of the estimated 11 million undocumented people in the United States. Senators also will consider issuing more visas to foreign workers.

The debate comes in response to concerns over national security, economic needs and changing U.S. demographics - and how to best replace a system that both punishes and rewards illegal immigrants and sends a mixed message abroad.

California, for example, denies drivers' licenses to undocumented immigrants, yet farmers and other employers count on workers breaching the border to fill jobs using fake documents. In Georgia, state lawmakers are pressuring Mexican immigrants by considering a special tax on those who wire money abroad and can't prove legal residency. At the same time, Georgia construction industry representatives admit they need foreign workers and ask not to be held accountable if their subcontractors are caught hiring the undocumented.

The contradictions reflect discomfort with U.S. links to Mexico, one of the United States' top oil providers, the second biggest consumer of U.S. goods after Canada -and the country with the biggest stake in the outcome of U.S. immigration reform.

It may not seem obvious to the public, but Mexican and U.S. officials negotiate daily over trade issues and jointly fight organized crime. While the results are not always positive, U.S. officials say they have enjoyed unprecedented cooperation from the Fox administration, the first democratically elected Mexican government after seven decades of corrupt one-party rule.

"If we can be partners in trade and fighting against terrorism, why not immigration?" asked Mexican Ambassador to the United States Carlos de Icaza.

Fabian Núñez, California's Democratic Assembly speaker and the son of Mexican immigrants, says Americans need to stop denying their interdependence with Mexico.

"Mexico is California's No. 1 trading partner," he said. "The only way to develop a clear immigration agenda is to stop thinking of ourselves as America with a fortress around us. We don't live in isolation."

Pro-integration policy advisers long have argued the United States should import more Mexican workers legally to fill job shortages.

Even more important, they say, would be a joint U.S., Canadian and Mexican effort to set up a European Union-style development fund to build roads and other infrastructure to help spur job growth in Mexico's most undeveloped regions. A development fund, they say, helped Greece, Portugal and Spain catch up with richer European countries and prepared them to join the EU.

The idea hasn't taken root in Washington. With Americans on the defensive in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the notion of a North American partnership seems more distant than ever.

Fox was the first Mexican president to admit Mexico's failure to produce enough jobs and reduce economic inequality during one-party rule. Along with President Bush, Fox has proposed expanding visas for Mexicans to match U.S. labor needs.

Since the terrorist attacks, however, some in Congress have used Fox's overtures as evidence of a plot to dump poor illegal immigrants on the United States.

Princeton University sociology professor Doug Massey, who has testified before the Senate about the failure of border enforcement policies, said Americans are hamstrung by a "staggering ignorance" when it comes to Mexico.

"Americans seem to be in a very xenophobic mood right now. Politicians, whether they believe in what they are saying or not, are acting like demagogues on this issue. The way some of them speak, it's as if it were Mexicans who had flown the planes into the twin towers," Massey said.

Mexico's economy has experienced a dramatic shift since the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, which lifted tariffs on U.S. products, including food produced in Mexico. Millions of Mexican farmers have been undercut and have opted to migrate. If NAFTA had included a European Union-style development fund to help create more alternative work, there might not be so many migrants now, Massey said.

"We didn't see it in our interests to put Mexico on the path to development. We wanted access to their market and to protect ourselves," Massey said

Now Americans appear "to want Mexican labor," he said, "but don't want Mexican people attached to it."

As the debate over America's immigration policy ensues, U.S. businesses are lobbying feverishly to convince the Senate that labor shortages and prices will rise if the nation ramps up enforcement without more visas.

Estimates from the Pew Hispanic Center are that U.S. employers have hired so many undocumented workers that illegal immigrants constitute about 5 percent of the work force.

Groups pushing for more stringent immigration restrictions don't agree the United States needs Mexican laborers to compete in the global economy.

The Federation for American Immigration Reform, the most influential restrictionist group, argues that foreign workers are taking jobs Americans would do for the right price, including harvesting crops.

"No labor is cheap, it's just subsidized," said FAIR spokesman Ira Mehlman. He accused the American upper crust of hiring undocumented nannies and other workers and forcing the rest of society to subsidize that labor with public health care and schools that have to educate their non-English-speaking children.

Those who oppose more visas and those who favor them may never agree on whether immigrants are a boost or a burden. The question is who will win in the Senate as legislators enter serious negotiations.

In December, the House refused to include a guest-worker measure in the enforcement-heavy bill they approved. Many congressmen said they would consider a proposal for guest workers only after more enforcement actions are in place in workplaces and at the border.

Jim Gilchrist, founder of the Minutemen Project that sent armed civilians to the U.S.-Mexico border, said he is convinced U.S. consumers would pay more for goods if they could save on taxes by ejecting undocumented immigrants. "We'd rather pay more for fruits and vegetables and goods and services than sell out our sovereignty," he said.

Bill Hing, an immigration law specialist at UC Davis, doesn't share Gilchrist's view that Americans would pay more to guarantee a native work force. "Witness the success of Wal-Mart," he said.

But Hing acknowledged national pressure to respond to the unregulated influx of illegal immigrants. A permanent guest worker program such as the one Bush and some senators are backing would constitute a "major movement" in U.S. immigration law, he said.

What could complicate this proposal are strong disagreements in Congress over whether to legalize immigrants already here and whether to offer future workers a path to citizenship.

Whatever happens, Hing said, lawmakers should heed what a Mexican consular official in a U.S. border town recently told him: "You can mine the border, and people will still come as long as there is economic disparity and jobs to be had. And that's not going to change overnight."

GUEST WORKER PROPOSALS

The House bill approved in December makes illegal immigrant status a felony and increases penalties for assisting illegal immigrants. The Senate Judiciary Committee now is considering its own proposals. Proposal from Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., committee chairman:

* Allow illegal immigrants who have been in the U.S. since January 2004 to obtain conditional work authorization if they have no criminal record, have never been deported, pay back taxes and their employers pay \$500 fines.

* Allow workers to bring family members but prohibit those relatives from working.

* Establish an "essential" guest worker program for jobs that employers show U.S. workers are not interested in. * Require them to leave if they lose the job and cannot find another position within 45 days. Proposal from Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Ted Kennedy, D-Mass.:

* Allow illegal immigrants who have been here since May 2005 and have no criminal records to pay a \$1,000 fine and other costs to apply for a six-year work visa and the right to bring certain family members.

* After four years, allow immigrants who are learning English and have a clean record to pay an additional \$1,000 to apply for permanent legal residency, with an employer sponsor.

* Establish an "essential" guest worker program with 400,000 visas that would fluctuate with market conditions; employers must try to hire U.S. workers first.

* Allow guest workers to search for work beyond their original employer.

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