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Bush tackles U.S. border control puzzle

CRITICS SAY ENFORCEMENT WILL FAIL UNLESS BUSINESSES STOP HIRING IMMIGRANTS

By Nicole Gaouette
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON - After decades of government failure to stem the tide of illegal immigration, the Bush administration and congressional Republicans are putting forward ambitious enforcement programs they say will finally lead to effective control over the nation's borders.

To achieve that long-sought goal, they are counting on adding hundreds of new Border Patrol and other immigration agents, who would be aided by new technology, such as infrared cameras, sensors that distinguish between humans and animals, and a new surveillance drone that can tell whether a furtive figure has a gun or just a pack of cigarettes.

Also proposed: accelerated processing of detainees, expanded holding facilities and some new carrots and sticks to persuade employers not to hire illegal immigrants.

Similar grand designs were unveiled in 1986, 1994 and 1996. All ended in failure. So why would the new initiatives fare any better?

Some supporters argue that the new resources would give the enforcement effort critical mass: enough resources to end the pattern of cracking down in one place, only to see the flow of illegal immigrants move elsewhere.

Also, some Republicans are making enforcement a condition for considering other facets of reform, including the Bush administration's proposed guest-worker program to give more immigrants some kind of legal status. Faced with congressional intransigence, the administration has decided to put enforcement first, even though top officials say it cannot succeed without a guest-worker system.

The likelihood of this drive succeeding already is viewed with skepticism, especially among officials in border communities. Some welcome the promises of new aid, but say they do not see how this effort is going to fare better than its predecessors.

"Everything is about the border, about controlling the border, but that will never happen. It's a myopic view," Ray Borane, mayor of Douglas, Ariz., said of Washington's immigration reform efforts. "The border is only . . . one piece of the puzzle. Washington also has to focus on where immigrants are going and what they're doing when they get there."

What the vast majority are doing is feeding the U.S. economy's seemingly insatiable appetite for immigrant workers. They are so vital to the economy that sending them home in a giant law enforcement crackdown is unthinkable, as well as impossible, government officials and outside experts say.

Nonetheless, the administration and Congress are pressing ahead on enforcement.

Near the top of many of the proposals is investment in infrastructure designed to make it harder for immigrants to bypass border checkpoints.

In the House, a newly passed immigration bill requires fencing, including lights and cameras, at certain points along the border. Already, extensive wall and fence systems have been erected in parts of California and Texas.

Chris Bauder, president of the National Border Patrol Council Local 1613, which represents San Diego agents, says his city's experience shows walls do not work. The fence in San Diego "just pushed that traffic elsewhere, and that's what a 2,000-mile fence will do: push it to ports of entry, to the coast, to the Canadian border, where we don't have anything."

"They're treating the symptoms, not the root cause," he said -- the U.S. jobs magnet.

The House bill mandates other infrastructure such as checkpoints and all-weather roads, while the administration's plans include vehicle barriers and stadium lighting, plus expanded detention facilities so that non-Mexicans can be held and sent home rather than simply released.

Officials such as Ron Colburn, chief border agent in Arizona's Yuma sector, welcome the technology. His station, among the county's busiest, will soon get ground-sensing radar, more infrared and daylight cameras, and digital wireless communications, which he is particularly excited about. Today, border agents often have to use personal cell phones to communicate from remote areas.

Colburn already is using the new Predator B pilotless aircraft.

"I was a skeptic, but now I'm sold," he said of the technology.

Others offer caveats. "The one drone is \$14 million," T.J. Bonner, president of the National Border Patrol Council, said of the Predator.

``That's a lot of money for one eye in the sky. . . . Piloted aircraft are more effective."

Yuma County Sheriff Ralph E. Ogden, whose area in Arizona borders two Mexican states and California, has a more basic concern.

``Technology can show you a picture of someone," he said, ``but someone still has to go out to get them. It's a great supplement, but no replacement for real people."

Congress has agreed to funding for an additional 1,700 border agents this year, for a total of at least 11,000. Originally, President Bush's 2006 budget had only allowed for an extra 210 agents.

The House legislation would require the military and the Department of Homeland Security to develop a plan to use more military surveillance equipment along the border.

The House measure also would allow local sheriffs within 25 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border to detain illegal immigrants and transfer them to federal authorities in the routine course of duty. Tony Estrada, sheriff of Arizona's Santa Cruz County, which shares 50 miles of border with Mexico, says his department does not have the time.

``I do not want to be doing immigration work, and I don't want my people to do it," he said. ``We don't have the resources."

Whatever new resources are deployed along the border, most experts agree that achieving control requires more effective enforcement in the interior of the country. Some say mandatory employee verification and increased penalties on employers who hire illegally, as required in the House legislation, is the only way to stem the tide.

They point out that this has never seriously been tried, though employer enforcement was part of a 1986 law. In fiscal 2004, the Department of Homeland Security issued just three notices of intent to fine employers. None was fined. This past year, the administration targeted one employer, Wal-Mart, which it described as a repeat offender.

Bauder argued that if employers were robustly targeted, illegal immigrants would leave, word of mouth would trickle back to Mexico and fewer immigrants would try to come.

But absent a guest-worker program, many said pressure from business would probably counter any move toward truly effective internal enforcement.

``Every commission that studied this came to the same conclusion: That you have to eliminate the jobs magnet if you want to eliminate illegal immigration," Bonner said.