



American Horse Council Washington Update

Senate Returns to Immigration Bill

The Senate will again take up comprehensive immigration reform on Tuesday, June 26, when it returns to the controversial legislation after a month-long hiatus during which the process for debate was finalized.

The first order of business will be a vote on cloture now scheduled for tomorrow evening. This is the procedure used by the Senate to place a time limit on consideration of a bill and thereby overcome a filibuster. Sixty votes are needed to invoke cloture. If that is approved, it will allow debate to continue on the approximately twenty amendments to be offered. The amendments are equally divided between Democrats and Republicans. After the amendments are offered and debated, a second cloture vote will occur later this week. If it passes, this will permit a final vote on the amendments and the bill itself.

Many of the attendees at last week's American Horse Council National Issues Forum were in Washington to lobby in support of this bill.

Tightening the nation's borders is a critical component of the legislation. Border security, additional enforcement capabilities, and a new electronic employment verification system must be in place before many of the other provisions of the bill are triggered. The Administration says that these new border security programs can be put into place in 18 months.

The bill provides for a new two-year "Y Visa" for temporary workers that would allow them to enter the U.S. each year to fill low-skilled jobs, similar to the current H-2A and H-2B programs. Such workers would be able to enter the U.S. and work for three two-year terms, provided they left the U.S. for a year between each term.

The legislation also includes many of the provisions in the AgJOBS bill in order to recognize the special seasonal needs of agriculture, including horse farms.

Undocumented workers in the U.S. as of January 1, 2007 could apply for a new "Z Visa," which could be renewed every four years. This would permit the estimated 12 million undocumented workers in the U.S. to regularize their status and continue working. To receive this visa, workers would have to pass a criminal background check, remain employed and pay fines.

These workers could eventually file for permanent residence once the current backlog cleared, estimated to take 8 to 10 years. These aliens would have to return to their native country for a short time to apply for their Green Card.

The legislation would alter the long-standing U.S. policy of giving substantial weight to family relationships to legal immigrants in the U.S. in awarding permanent resident status to new immigrants. It sets up a new "merit system" that is based on skills, education, work experience, English proficiency and other attributes that new immigrants can bring to the U.S., similar to other countries.

Some of the amendments to be offered this week could affect some of these provisions.