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PUSH TO PROTECT IMMIGRANT FARM WORKERS

By Laura Meckler
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Farm workers and some agriculture industry officials are making a last-minute push for President Barack Obama to include protections for undocumented agricultural workers in his new immigration policy, worried that the pending executive action may be the last opportunity to change immigration rules for a while.

Their hope is that at least some farm workers can win the temporary legal status and work permits that are expected to be offered to several million people now in the country illegally, according to officials who are lobbying for the change.

The farm industry, however, is divided on the matter, with some worried that granting work permits would give workers the chance to move to other jobs rather than bolster the industry. The American Farm Bureau Federation, the U.S.'s largest agricultural trade group, isn't pushing for Mr. Obama to act without Congress, saying such a move would hurt the effort to pass more durable changes to the immigration system through laws.

Mr. Obama plans to announce his new policy this week, according to people close to the process. Republican lawmakers have promised to block his plans, saying Mr. Obama shouldn't make policy changes unilaterally.

The push to include agriculture workers is being led by the United Farm Workers union and is backed by groups including the National Immigration Forum, which works with businesses that support liberalized immigration legislation. Officials say they haven't been told whether the White House will include their requests in the final package.

"We want as many farm workers covered as possible," said Giev Kashkooli, national political legislative director for the United Farm Workers. He said that could be accomplished both through general provisions that apply to a range of illegal immigrants and through special provisions for the industry.

Mr. Obama's executive action is expected to help other industries, particularly high-tech companies, by making more visas available for high-skilled workers to enter the country legally.

A White House spokesman had no comment on details of the president's plans. Mr. Obama has promised to put in place new immigration policies by year's end, saying he has legal authority to do so and that Congress has declined to act.

The White House had considered waiting until Congress clears a spending bill that must be enacted by Dec. 11 to keep the government funded, an effort to avoid entangling immigration with the budget. But officials decided to move ahead this week, one person close to the process said.

On Capitol Hill, Republicans continued to sort through ways to unravel Mr. Obama's plans. House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) said Tuesday that GOP leaders were considering a range of ideas.

Some conservatives have pressed to include a measure in the spending bill blocking funding for any executive action on immigration. But given that Mr. Obama would likely veto such a bill, that move raised the possibility that Republicans could be blamed for trying to provoke another partial shutdown of the government.

One option suggested by House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R., Ky.) was to pass legislation funding the government through September, avoiding the possibility of a shutdown. Under this option, lawmakers later could bring up a separate measure rescinding funding for any programs Mr. Obama deploys if he acts on immigration on his own.

Rep. Tom Rooney (R., Fla.), a member of the appropriations panel, said that approach would avoid any threat of shutting down the government "over something that doesn't have anything to do with our budget."

Mr. Obama's package, say people close to White House deliberations, is expected to grant temporary legal status to several million people, likely parents of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents who have been in the U.S. for many years, among others. The farm groups involved are hoping that the definition will be broad enough to encompass a large number of farm workers, or that Mr. Obama will include targeted provisions for them.

An estimated 70% or more of agriculture workers are in the U.S. illegally, experts say. About 540,000 of the estimated 11 million undocumented people in the U.S. either work in agriculture or have parents who do, according to data to be published online Wednesday by the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute.

"We've been urging the administration to pay attention to the ag industry," said Ali Noorani, who runs the National Immigration Forum, which has lobbied the White House to include provisions. "Growers are tired of their operations always being at risk of immigration enforcement."

But others in the industry worry that giving farm workers the ability to work legally will prompt many to seek other jobs.

"Unless it includes incentives for people to continue to work in the ag force, it could hasten attrition," said Craig Regelbrugge, national co-chairman of the Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform, which includes industry associations and farmers.

Kristi Boswell of the American Farm Bureau Federation said her group is also not pushing for executive action, partly because she fears it would hurt the legislative effort. "Any action taken by the president would be temporary by nature and not give us that long-term stability we truly need in the industry," she said.