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THREE LIKELY GOP WHITE HOUSE HOPEFULS BACK LEGAL STATUS FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

By Beth Reinhard and Mark Peters
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Three possible Republican presidential candidates called for legal protections for undocumented workers Saturday, contrasting themselves from the rest of the field.

In remarks at the Iowa Ag Summit, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, former New York Gov. George Pataki and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham also said they support stricter border security, a position in line with the Republican Party's conservative base.

"Immigrants that are here need to have a path to legalized status," said Mr. Bush, adding that they need to learn English and hold down jobs. "This is the only serious, thoughtful way to deal with this and we better start doing it because this is a competitive world."

Mr. Graham, who co-sponsored legislation in 2013 that would have provided a pathway for some illegal immigrants to become citizens, said, "They're all not going to walk back to where they came from. Be practical."

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio was another co-sponsor of the immigration bill, which was widely opposed by conservatives. But Mr. Rubio, who did not attend Saturday's summit, has disavowed a broad immigration overhaul and said it was a mistake not to secure the border first.

Meanwhile, former Texas Gov. Rick Perry detailed a plan of strategic fences, fast-response teams, and planes, while calling for an overhaul of federal immigration enforcement, including a system to track visa holders as effectively as packages.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker rejected measures denounced by conservatives as "amnesty" for illegal immigrants, while also labeling border security as the first step. "It's a national security issue. None of us are going to build a house and put a fence around three sides," he said.

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz took a similar stance, putting border security first along with fixing what he called a broken system for legal immigration.

Sondra Childs-Smith, an Ames conservative activist who attended the summit, said Mr. Bush's position on immigration will make it difficult for him to win over Iowa Republicans.

"He's definitely not a conservative to me. He's more like Democrat-lite," she said. "People should not be rewarded for breaking the law."