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FATE OF THE IMMIGRATION BILL MAY HINGE ON FARM DISTRICTS

By Ron Nixon
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WASHINGTON — Any chance of getting immigration legislation through the House will most likely depend on representatives like Doc Hastings.

While he has not been the most outspoken about immigration issues, proponents of an overhaul are counting on Mr. Hastings, a Republican, for one reason: His Congressional district, which cuts a wide path through the center of Washington State, depends heavily on agriculture, an industry with a significant stake in the outcome of the debate.

Much of Washington's \$46 billion agriculture sector is in Mr. Hastings's district, where farmers grow everything from apples to wheat. Local agribusinesses there rely on a work force largely composed of immigrants, thousands of whom are believed to be in the country illegally.

A coalition of 11 agriculture groups has launched a major lobbying campaign in support of an immigration overhaul. Members of the effort, known as the Agricultural Workforce Coalition, see representatives from districts where thousands of jobs depend on agriculture as key to any effort to pass the legislation.

Agriculture Department data shows that Republicans represent 17 of the top 20 districts where agriculture is a major industry. And farm groups are hoping that local concerns will trump national politics as the legislation moves forward in the Republican-controlled House, where it will most likely face a tough challenge from conservatives who have been hostile to previous attempts to change the system.

"Republicans from big agriculture districts will definitely be the deciding factor in getting any type of immigration reform through the House," said Dean Norton, a dairy farmer who is president of the New York Farm Bureau. "There is a lot of clamoring in these districts to do something about immigration."

Mr. Hastings has not said if he would support the immigration legislation introduced in the Senate, but he has backed efforts to help the farm sector in the past.

Neal Kirby, Mr. Hastings's spokesman, said the congressman "has long advocated for a guest worker program for agriculture that is workable and will provide central Washington farmers with the legal work force they need to fill jobs that Americans are not" willing to do.

"Developing a workable program as a part of immigration reform is critical to central Washington's economy," he said.

The farm sector has been a core constituency of the Republican Party for many years. Campaign contribution data from the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington research

group, shows that since 1990, agriculture interests have mostly given to Republicans in Congress.

Last year, farm-heavy districts voted overwhelmingly for Mitt Romney. Tom Nassif, president of the Western Growers, and Chuck Conners, president of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, two of the organizations pushing for immigration legislation, were advisers to Mr. Romney during the campaign.

Agriculture's main focus is on changing the H-2A visa program, which allows fruit and vegetable growers, slaughterhouses and other agribusinesses to hire temporary workers for jobs that cannot be filled by Americans.

The system allows foreign workers to enter the country on a visa for no longer than one year.

But agriculture officials say the current system does not work because industries like dairy farming and meat production are year-round enterprises and are unable to fill their need for workers. They also say the program is overly bureaucratic.

Among the changes the farm sector wants to see is the replacement of the seasonal visa program with one that would allow workers to accept a job under a three-year visa.

The agriculture groups, which lobbied heavily on Capitol Hill as a group of senators worked to draft an immigration bill, say they will soon began a similar campaign in the House.

"We will bring the weight of growers in all 50 states to the Senate and the House in support of this legislation," said Tom Stenzel, chief executive of the United Fresh Produce Association, a trade group of fruit and vegetable growers.

Despite high unemployment in Mr. Hastings's Washington district, growers and other farm interests there say they still suffer from worker shortages because of current immigration laws.

Mr. Kirby, Mr. Hastings's spokesman, said the congressman had met with the farm lobbying coalition and had been in contact with growers. "This has been a longtime priority of Congressman Hastings," he said.