

Reid Narrows Goals for Immigration This Year

By John Stanton and Jennifer Bendery

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Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said Tuesday that while he remains committed to pursuing a comprehensive immigration reform bill, he may be forced to settle for a narrower measure this fall.

The Nevada Democrat has repeatedly said he would bring comprehensive legislation to the floor this year, but on Tuesday, he seemed to acknowledge he had lowered his sights.

He specifically mentioned the DREAM Act, which is focused on providing a path to citizenship and educational opportunities for children in the country illegally, as a viable alternative to broader legislation.

"We're going to continue working on immigration. And if we find a way of doing the big bill, we'll do that. If not, we'll have to take a real strong look at the DREAM Act," Reid said, adding that immigration legislation would not come up before the August recess.

Earlier in the day, Reid spokesman Jim Manley issued a statement saying the lack of GOP support for comprehensive immigration reform was forcing the Majority Leader to explore the possibility of passing smaller bills, such as the DREAM Act and a measure by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) focused on immigrant farm workers.

Reid "is still committed to reforming a system that is unfair to the American taxpayer, worker and economy, but that isn't possible without Republican support," Manley said. "In the meantime, he is exploring whether he can pass smaller legislation, such as AgJOBS or the DREAM Act, of which he is an original co-sponsor and longtime supporter."

According to Democratic aides, Reid's decision to explore the possibility of narrower legislation came after Reform Immigration for America – a coalition of immigration reform activists – urged him to do so.

In a July 22 letter to Reid, RIA Chairman Ali Noorani said, "We expect that you and your colleagues will not rest until Congress passes comprehensive immigration reform ... in the meantime, we strongly urge the Senate to move forward with the DREAM Act and AgJOBS now."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein is pushing a bill aimed at agricultural workers. Reid had previously indicated he would not abandon comprehensive reform in favor of narrower measures until reform activists had come to terms with the political realities standing in the way of a broad bill this year.

Democratic backers of the two bills praised the possibility of moving to a narrower approach.

"This has been 10 years [coming]. It's a bipartisan bill," Feinstein said of her legislation.

Feinstein also praised the DREAM Act: "There are children who just want the opportunity to go to college. ... This is what the American dream should be about."

However, Majority Whip Dick Durbin, the sponsor of the DREAM Act, acknowledged some Democrats will not vote for it, and it remains to be seen whether backers can muster enough GOP support to move the bill.

"We've been talking about it," the Illinois Democrat said, referring to conversations with Reid. "There's been no timetable set for calling it up. He is totally in support of it with me. I think his challenge to me is the right one: Do you have the votes? We're not going to get all the Democratic votes. We need some Republican votes."

Durbin added: "This has more likelihood of bipartisan support than any aspect of immigration, perhaps, other than AgJOBS. I think AgJOBS has bipartisan support, too."

Sen. Dick Lugar (Ind.), the sole Republican co-sponsor of both the AgJOBS and DREAM bills, said he "would look forward to supporting those two bills" but acknowledged additional Republican support may be scarce.

And Democratic Conference Vice Chairman Charles Schumer, who has been working on his own comprehensive immigration reform bill, indicated both broad and narrow approaches may fall flat, according to the political blog Talking Points Memo.

"We don't have 60 votes on either comprehensive or the DREAM Act at this point," the New York Democrat reportedly said.

Indeed, top Republicans largely belittled Reid's efforts on immigration as little more than pandering to Latino voters in Nevada as part of his own personal re-election strategy.

"It seems like Reid has a different proposal on immigration reform on a weekly, if not daily, basis," Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said.

"This is getting to be a joke. No one believes that there is enough time that we could do a responsible job," said Sen. John Cornyn (Texas), chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. The Senate should approach the issue in "a responsible, reasonable way and not just try to play to the peanut gallery and act like we're going to do something we're not."

In the House, Democratic leaders plan to bring emergency border security funding to the floor later this week after the funding was stripped from the war supplemental in the Senate, according to a Democratic aide.

The vote will give the party's rank-and-file Members something to take home with them in August on the volatile immigration issue and potentially put Republicans in an awkward position if they vote against the funding.

Rep. Luis Gutierrez, the Illinois Democrat who chairs the Immigration Task Force for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, said he will continue to press for passage of comprehensive

immigration reform instead of “settling” on its components, although he said somewhat sarcastically that he understands why Reid may be pivoting to the DREAM Act.

Reid has “like 10 kids who are going to get arrested in his office” if the DREAM Act does not pass, Gutierrez said. “And he’s got his election in Nevada. I mean put all of this in context.”

Gutierrez also hit President Barack Obama over his failure to follow through with a campaign promise to pass immigration reform during his first year in office.

“The White House has to be almost tickled pink these days. The conversation is no longer is about comprehensive immigration reform and the promise and commitment of Obama and his administration. We’re discussing whether there are 60 votes for the DREAM Act,” Gutierrez said. “It’s almost as though his waiting long enough has frustrated a sufficient number of people to say, ‘We won’t do it.’”

Emily Pierce and Steven T. Dennis contributed to this report.