

GOP torn between anti-immigrant fervor, business

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As expected, Georgia's political leadership is suddenly having second and third thoughts about waging an all-out war on illegal immigrants. They're being reminded by influential and powerful interests that their own rhetoric notwithstanding, illegal immigrants are actually an integral part of the state's economy, particularly in rural agricultural areas.

As a congressman, for example, Nathan Deal was a strong advocate of forcing businesses to verify the legal status of every new hire through the federal government's E-Verify program. He also campaigned on that proposal as a candidate for governor, But this week, Deal confessed to sudden doubts about the program's utility.

"There are questions being raised whether or not the E-Verify system is what we all assume that it is — easily used, reliable and accurate," Deal told reporters, suggesting that he had not previously been aware of such questions.

That's hard to believe, because doubts about the program are longstanding. For example, a new study by the federal Government Accountability Office found that while E-Verify has gotten better since earlier GAO studies in 2005 and 2008, it still has serious problems with accuracy and remains vulnerable to identity theft and employer fraud.

For example, in fiscal 2009 more than 22,000 people were falsely determined by E-Verify to be ineligible to work simply because of a name mismatch, often because of something as simple as a typo. "Approximately 76 percent, or 17,098, were for citizens, and approximately 24 percent, or 5,414, were for noncitizens," GAO found. If use of the system were made mandatory nationwide, about 164,000 citizens and noncitizens a year would be falsely identified as unable to work based on name mismatches alone.

And if you're one of those unfortunate souls, "individuals face formidable challenges in getting the inaccuracy or inconsistency corrected," GAO warned.

The system also can be easily gamed by illegal workers and by employers, GAO found. In fact, the holes in the system are large enough that without a more aggressive workplace enforcement program, "more unscrupulous employers could have the opportunity to hire unauthorized workers without much risk of detection."

In other words, E-Verify simply isn't capable yet of handling the responsibility that some want to place on it. But that hasn't stopped legislators in both the House and Senate from pressing bills to require Georgia businesses to use the system anyway.

Not surprisingly, the bills' most vocal opponents have been the state's contracting and farm industries. Officially, the Georgia Farm Bureau claims that its opposition has nothing to do with the \$68.8 billion industry's reliance on illegal immigrants. Instead, it "stems from the fact that legal immigrants might be fearful of working in Georgia if the state is seen as anti-immigrant. If immigrant labor were to avoid the state of Georgia, there would be major economic consequences within large segments of agriculture."

Given the circumstances, that's as much candor as you can expect, I suppose.

The Farm Bureau carries a lot of clout in the Legislature, particularly among rural and South Georgia legislators. In the Senate version of the E-Verify bill, state Sen. Jack Murphy, R-Cumming, tries to defuse that opposition by exempting farmers from the requirement to use the system. If Senate Bill 40 were to become law, illegal immigrants could come to Georgia to perform farm labor, but nothing else.

But that creates problems of its own. You can make a principled argument that immigrants who enter the country illegally have no right to work here. However, that argument collapses into a pile of hypocrisy once you try to argue they have no right to work here except in the low-paying, physically demanding jobs that the rest of us don't want.

In other words, they aren't good enough to go to college with our children, they aren't good enough to dream of citizenship, they aren't good enough to serve this country in the military or even get a driver's license, but darn if they aren't quite talented at picking blueberries.

Given this state's history, we ought to think carefully about passing a law that says a certain class of people are fit only for working in our fields and picking our crops.