

## **Employers: Let workers stay**

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Larry Durrett knows from his experience as an owner of businesses in Fort Worth that it's not always easy to fill jobs at fast-food restaurants.

But if 12 million workers -- the number of illegal immigrants estimated to be in the United States -- suddenly leave the work force, the fallout would be dramatic, Durrett said.

"I hear people say we should send those people back to where they came from," said Durrett, president of Jacksonville-based Southern Multifoods and owner of about 30 Taco Bells and KFC restaurants in Fort Worth.

"We can't. We'd shut down."

Durrett and others -- including former White House adviser Karl Rove and U.S. Sen. John Cornyn of Texas -- spoke Tuesday about the need to fix what many call a "broken" immigration system during a Texas Employers for Immigration Reform summit in Tyler.

Many said they hope that any solution will allow workers from other countries to stay here to help meet U.S. work-force needs.

"Our immigration system is antiquated and broken, and it will remain that way until Congress has the courage to pass laws to reform it," said Cliff Butler, vice chairman of the board at Pilgrim's Pride, which helped create TEIR.

As the nationwide debate about immigration continues to simmer amid calls for change, top leaders say it's long past time the issue is addressed.

"This needs to be an issue addressed this year," Rove said. "If we don't solve this, we will suffer ... most especially in the soul of the America spirit."

### **The debate**

Immigration overhaul has been divisive for years as some say the borders need to be closed and illegal immigrants should be sent home, allowing for more job opportunities and better wages for U.S. workers.

Others argue that illegal workers here now should be given some sort of amnesty and be allowed to apply for citizenship and continue working as an integral part of the nation's work force.

Many have criticized Congress' inaction, which has even prompted some communities -- including Farmers Branch --- to pass what some call anti-immigration measures.

Many of those new laws have ended up in the courts.

Rove, in a select public appearance, told the crowd of more than 150 gathered at the University of Texas at Tyler on Tuesday that 1 of every 20 workers in the United States is here illegally.

Not from crossing over the Mexican border, he said.

From flying in from another country with a legal visa and overstaying it, he said.

"If you are an illegal alien, you are more likely to be working than if you are a legal U.S. citizen," Rove said. "People are scared to death that America isn't going to be American."

### **Congressional action**

Cornyn said finding a solution is "a matter of tremendous national importance."

But he said Congress must have something to go on, to show the direction a majority of U.S. citizens would like the government to follow.

"I think it's important that we demand there be an open and public debate in the presidential campaign about this issue," said Cornyn, whose immigration bill failed in 2005. "We need to have a discussion and then have a vote.

"Let's give the next president a mandate on the issue of immigration."

U.S. Rep. Ralph Hall, R-Rockwall, said he wishes Congress hadn't recessed in August and instead worked day and night to find a solution.

He said he doesn't know the solution but believes that it starts with securing the U.S. borders and includes making people who live in the United States pay taxes and abide by the laws.

"We should forget maybe for a while [in Congress] that we're Republicans and Democrats and realize we're Americans with a problem ... and we've got to deliver," Hall said.

### **Business concerns**

Texas Association of Business President Bill Hammond said he believes that three components are crucial to a comprehensive immigration plan:

Border security, which includes allowing enough legal immigrants into Texas to meet the state's work force needs.

Allowing immigrants already working in the United States to "come out of the shadows" and work here legally.

Creating a new program to help employers easily determine which workers are legally working in the United States, so they don't have to serve as immigration police.

"Comprehensive immigration reform is essential to the future economy of Texas," Hammond said. "We are calling on Congress today."