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Amendments To Test Strength Of Immigration Coalition ...

The Senate will have to dispense with dozens of amendments to the immigration bill this week to hold together the fragile coalition and complete work on it by Friday. Fourteen amendments are pending, and an aide to Senate Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee Chairman Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., said today another 15 or 20 might be introduced this week. "There are going to be some tough votes this week," he predicted. The amendments already introduced will be given first priority for votes Tuesday and Wednesday. Majority Leader Reid and Kennedy have not yet determined when Reid will file cloture, and the aide left open the possibility that debate could spill into next week. "At the end of Wednesday, we'll know the shape of the bill and the trajectory of the bill," he said. Among the more troublesome amendments for supporters is one from Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, to permanently bar immigrants who have committed certain crimes from obtaining permanent visas. Those crimes include entering the country illegally. Kennedy's aide said the amendment would cause half of the unauthorized farmworkers to be ineligible for the proposed "Z" work visa that would give them legal status. The vote is expected to be close.

Other contentious amendments will deal with the bill's "point system" for determining who gets permanent visas, also called green cards. Several amendments would tinker with that system, including one from Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., to sunset it after five years. The point system is a central component of the bipartisan bill, along with a new guestworker program and legalization for the current illegal population. The point system is also the only component of the compromise that has not been seriously tested on the Senate floor. Before the Memorial Day recess, the Senate easily defeated two amendments to eliminate the bill's guestworker and legalization programs.

Lobbyists from the business community and the immigrant advocacy groups have expressed extreme distaste for the point system, arguing it is discriminatory to immigrants from certain countries and would hamper employers' ability to find workers. Bolstering those arguments is **a new study from the National Foundation for American Policy**, a think tank that focuses on trade and immigration. According to the analysis, done by former Capitol Hill aide and NFAP President Stuart Anderson, some foreign nurses and non-English speaking Nobel Prize winners could be given less than half of the possible 100 points under the merit-based system, making it virtually impossible for them to gain permanent legal entry into the United States. Because the bill limits the number of green cards granted per country, even the most qualified Indian applicants may be turned away while applicants with half as many points from another country would be allowed in, according to the study by the free-market oriented think tank.

Finally, CBO and the Joint Committee on Taxation weighed in today on the immigration bill as amended. They estimated the bill would increase direct federal spending by \$28 billion over 10 years, stemming from income tax credits and Medicaid. The bill also would increase federal revenues by about \$48 billion over the same time period, largely from Social Security payroll taxes, which are considered off-budget. The bill would increase the U.S. population by 1.8 million over 10 years, but by 2027, the net change in population would be negligible, according to the report.

-- by *Fawn Johnson*