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**Immigration's Latest Debate:
Is U.S. Big Enough?**

By JUNE KRONHOLZ

Two's company, but what's a crowd?

The latest point of debate between supporters and opponents of the Senate's expansive immigration bill is whether the country, with 3.5 million square miles of land, has room for more people -- or whether it is already too crowded.

The Senate bill and a competing enforcement-only measure in the House are stalled as the two bodies hold hearings around the country this summer. But as passed in May, the Senate measure would legalize millions of illegal immigrants and allow their families to join them in the U.S. It also would admit hundreds of thousands of temporary workers each year and would more than quadruple the number of jobs-based permanent visas available annually.

Immigration supporters say the U.S. needs a steady supply of workers to offset its falling birth rate, and many demographers say the country can absorb more people. "Will we run out of space? It seems unlikely," says Kenneth Prewitt, a former director of the U.S. Census Bureau.

The U.S. population is expected to hit 300 million in October, an increase of 19 million people since 2000 and almost 100 million since 1970. Even so, that averages only one person for every 7.6 acres of U.S. land area. But those who favor limiting immigration say that huge new flows of foreigners will add to urban sprawl, strain public services and put new demands on limited natural resources.

"If you ask, 'Can the U.S. hold a billion people?' the answer is unequivocally yes. But do we want that?" asks Steven Camarota, research director of Washington's Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates reduced immigration. Most new immigrants are going to "perhaps 15 states and 20 metropolitan areas. No one's going to North Dakota," he says.

It's hard to know how many people the Senate bill would add to the U.S. population. Demographers can only estimate how many illegal immigrants are here now, and how many would bring families to the U.S. The economy would help determine how many new immigrants would come for jobs and how many would stay.

But the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank that opposes expanded immigration, estimates that 66 million immigrants would be added to the population during the next 20 years instead of the one million a year allowed by current law.

Pro-immigration groups challenge the Heritage estimate by citing a Congressional Budget Office study predicting that, over 10 years, the Senate bill would allow only eight million more immigrants than under current law.

Separately, the **National Foundation for American Policy**, a nonpartisan think tank in Arlington, Va., estimates the bill would admit 28.5 million immigrants over 20 years, in addition to those who already could enter under current law.

Both sides in the debate point out that many of those immigrants already are here and the bill would only legalize their status, not add to the population. But they disagree about how many of those would seek legal status, an important step for policy planners because it determines how many could then bring families and add to the immigrant flow.

The Congressional Budget Office predicts that fewer than four million of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the U.S. will come forward, pay fines and begin the citizenship process. The Center for Immigration Studies puts the number at 10 million immigrants, who would be joined almost immediately by 4.5 million spouses and children. After those immigrants become permanent residents in about six years, they could petition to bring in parents and siblings.

Most demographers say the U.S. could absorb a big influx -- if only because it absorbed even bigger inflows in the past. "There's no reason based on historical record to expect" that increased immigration would cause a rise in unemployment or racial and cultural tensions, says William Butz, president of the Population Reference Bureau, a Washington research group.

William Frey, a demographer at the nonpartisan Brookings Institution, predicts that market forces such as job availability and housing prices would disperse people from crowded big cities to smaller towns that need young people. Better planning will reduce sprawl and traffic congestion, and technology will make more efficient use of natural resources, he predicts.

"If those were the issues, we wouldn't have to worry too much about limiting immigration," he says. But those aren't the only issues, he adds.

Many environmentalists worry about competition for water, which already is an issue in the West and Southwest, where many new immigrants settle. The Center for Immigration Studies says about half of all immigrants now live in the suburbs, which, it adds, increases the number of cars and the demand for fuel, and adds to air pollution and commuter congestion.

A bigger population also takes up more land. In a 2003 study, the Center estimated that 39,000 square miles of rural land were converted to development between 1982 and 1997. Population growth accounted for 52% of the new development, it said.

Even some immigration supporters worry that the Senate bill will add mostly low-skilled workers whose demands for schooling and social services will make them costly to assimilate. The size of the new-immigrant flow "is not so important as making sure those who come can be incorporated into the economy and acculturated," says Brookings' Mr. Frey.

Most of that acculturation takes place in public schools, which have become a flashpoint in the debate as enrollments soar and taxpayers are called on to fund language and social-services programs.

The Department of Education says public-school enrollment grew by more than one million between 2000 and 2005, and will grow by an additional 1.4 million by 2013, when it is expected to reach 49.7 million. Immigration is expected to account for almost all of that growth.

The U.S. fertility rate -- the number of children per woman -- has been falling for decades and now is less than two. But Hispanics, who account for more than half of all immigrants and 80% of illegal immigrants, average almost three babies per woman. As a result, 20% of children under age five in the U.S. are Hispanic.

Mr. Prewitt, the former census director, says concerns about assimilating millions more immigrants are "not trivial," even though Americans "have been complaining about crowding since the frontier days." But he also suggests that allowing millions of people to move from less-developed countries might improve the global environment -- an argument popular with some environmentalists because it offsets fears of resource depletion.

Immigrants "won't be burning coal or cutting rain forests if they move here," Mr. Prewitt says. "Rich countries can make technology adjustments better than poor ones. And these people are still going to be born," wherever they end up living.