

# WYOMING LAWMAKERS SAY 'NO' TO HARSH ENFORCEMENT BILL

Businesses and immigration advocates have dodged a bullet in Wyoming.

Wyoming's legislative session opened with Republican Rep. Pete Illoway, powerful chairman of the Corporations Committee, introducing a bill that drew from the worst elements of Arizona's and Oklahoma's tough immigration enforcement measures.

But Illoway's bill is dead. The final day to pass bills in the Wyoming House has come and gone. And instead of voting on Illoway's measure, the legislature will take a pass on immigration enforcement.

In its place, Wyoming lawmakers will tell Congress to fix immigration.

The House's Agriculture Committee, where Illoway's bill had been referred, has passed a joint resolution calling on President Barack Obama and Congress to make immigration reform – including a program for guest workers – a high priority.

## A message to Congress

Because of the crush of other business, the resolution is not expected to be voted on by the rest of the legislature. But its author, Rep. Frank Philt, third in leadership in the House, plans to ask lawmakers to sign the resolution, and he will pass it on to Wyoming's congressional delegation.

Philt, a sheep rancher, has had personal experience with the H-2A agricultural guest worker program and knows the challenges of hiring foreign workers.

His resolution calls on Washington lawmakers to do several things:

- "Enhance and enforce federal immigration policy and law and provide a comprehensive solution to the problem of illegal immigration existing in the state of Wyoming and the nation."
- Significantly increase the number of immigration visas issued each year by, among other steps, raising current limits on H-1B and H-2B visas. The legislators want Congress to focus particularly on seasonal hospitality workers and industries requiring highly trained and educated workers.
- Expedite work authorization for foreign nationals with advanced degrees from U.S. colleges and universities.

Wyoming business leaders worked with lawmakers to craft the resolution as an alternative to Illoway's bill. And Wyoming's Democratic Gov. Dave Freudenthal encouraged the alternative in his State of the State Address.

"The absence of the federal government solving a problem doesn't mean we ought to step up and spend a lot of state money addressing one more federal issue that they haven't handled," Freudenthal said. "We do enough of that. Maybe there's another way to address the issue.

"I'm comfortable on immigration when we say we don't want illegal immigrants taking advantage of state assistance. When we begin to move to the next step, which is to fill the void left by the federal government, I get nervous because it is going to cost us money and, for one thing, it seems to me that we ought to calculate that out before we start down that road."

### **Rejecting a 'climate of fear'**

The Casper Wyoming-Tribune also opposed the bill, singling out the provision that would have made it a felony to "transport or conceal" illegal immigrants, something patterned after Oklahoma's law.

"Our opposition to this bill doesn't mean Wyoming should condone illegal immigration," the editors said. But the bill would create "a climate of fear and harassment of legal immigrants, merely because of their ethnic origin."

Illoway's bill would also have required public employers and businesses that contract with a public employer to enroll in E-Verify, the federal government's web-based worker verification system. Employers found to have hired illegal immigrants would have faced stiff fines for doing so, and the measure would have barred illegal immigrants from receiving government benefits.