



NO-MATCH DATA PROGRAM:

Aid, not Apocalypse

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A Role of Government LIFT Commentary

With proper enforcement of federal immigration and employment law, there would be more jobs for unemployed Texans, lower public assistance costs for the state and a vastly decreased incentive for illegal immigration.

No-match data program is aid, not apocalypse

By BRENT CONNETT

President Bush's proposal to enforce existing immigration and labor laws has drawn the ire of businesses in Texas and nationwide.

When the no-match enforcement proposal on Social Security information was first issued in August, Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business, painted a picture of an economic doomsday: "Meals in restaurants will go uncooked and unserved. Beds in hotel rooms will go unmade. Farms and ranches will lose the hands that help feed our people. The engines of economic growth will cool."

More recently, Hammond bemoaned the termination of as many as 750,000 workers, calling the proposed enforcement plan "draconian."

For decades, businesses have knowingly employed illegal immigrants, in direct violation of existing law. The question for the Texas Association of Business is simple: Do you value illegal labor over the enforcement of U.S. law?

Illegal labor is attractive to businesses because it is cheap. Economist George Borjas, for example, calculates that illegal immigration depresses wages for low-skilled labor by 5 to 8 percent. Unscrupulous employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants violate federal labor laws and create an incentive that encourages mass migration from Mexico and other nations.

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The approximately 8 million illegal immigrants in the United States work force signal to others that crossing the border in search of a job is an acceptable risk. Without access to jobs (as well as lax border security and a broken procedure for coming to the U.S. legally), illegal immigration would not have become the national crisis it is. Requiring businesses to fire employees who, after 90 days, cannot remedy a no-match letter is imperative because certain employers are complicit in perpetuating illegal migration.

The President's proposal simply adds teeth to the no-match letters that are mailed when employees' Social Security numbers can't be matched to a name or record: Employers must give employees 90 days to remedy a no-match letter. If the problem isn't cleared up, the employer must fire the employee or

potentially face criminal charges, which is the best means to effectively limit the unlawful employment of illegals while stemming the tide of illegal immigration.

Business lobbyists argue that simple clerical errors often lead to the issuance of no-match letters. James Lockhart, deputy commissioner of Social Security, refutes this. Social Security Administration systems utilize "more than twenty automated routines to identify commonly occurring errors," he has said.

Experts agree that the overwhelming majority of Social Security no-match letters are issued to illegal immigrants, making enforcement of the no-match letters a targeted approach to solving a national crisis.

But the question remains: If the federal government cracks down on illegal immigration by simply enforcing existing labor law, would the economy suffer?

Stanford economist Thomas Sowell puts it this way: "Even in occupations where illegals are concentrated, such as agriculture, cleaning, construction, and food preparation, the great majority of the work is still being done by people who are not illegal aliens."

Sowell notes that even in agriculture, the industry with the highest concentration of illegal workers, more than three-quarters of the work force is legal. Adding a measure of enforcement to the current no-match letters might, in fact, have the salutary benefit of prompting employers to consider hiring the 478,553

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Texans who were unemployed in February. Hundreds of thousands of Texans are part of a readily available work force who can fill low-skill jobs.

Furthermore, Sowell's research puts the lie to the argument that "Americans just won't do those jobs." Americans can and will fill the jobs currently

held by the illegal work force -- they need a chance to do so. The president's proposal should prompt businesses to look to the unemployed as the best option for filling jobs, and it just might help alleviate strains on taxpayers.

With proper enforcement of federal immigration and employment law, there would be more jobs for unemployed Texans, lower public assistance costs for the state and a vastly decreased incentive for illegal immigration.

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