

Some California employers welcome immigration reform

By Shan Li and Diana Marcum, Los Angeles Times

Central Valley farmers, Southern California bankers and Silicon Valley executives have all struggled to find workers – and they say an outdated immigration policy has been to blame.

They're all hoping that a bipartisan group of U.S. senators will have the answer when it unveils its plan, as early as this week, to overhaul federal immigration laws.

Their stance: Reform couldn't come quickly enough.

"What's at stake is the future of our economy, whether we can remain the most entrepreneurial nation," said Steve Case, co-founder of America Online and now chairman of investment firm Revolution. He called immigration a "key reason why America has been innovative and entrepreneurial and has had the leading economy in the world."

The danger of not having a viable immigration plan is evident to Steve Spate. The Central Valley raisin grower whose farm is just west of Selma said he has struggled with a perennial labor shortage.

"When you're standing on the edge of your fields in the morning and the rains are coming and not enough workers show up, when your livelihood and your ability to make payments on your house and your equipment are on the line, you'll take anybody you can find," he said.

Foreign workers affect nearly every aspect of the state's economy.

Those highly educated work in Silicon Valley start-ups and tech giants such as Facebook and Google. Low-wage workers toil

in farms, serve food in restaurants and work in hotels. The construction industry employs a number of immigrants to build homes.

The sweeping bill tries to fix huge problems plaguing the U.S. and its inflow of foreign workers.

Crafted by four Democratic and four Republican senators known as the Gang of Eight, the bill is aimed at creating an immigration system for the 21st century.

It offers, for instance, a 13-year pathway to citizenship for many of the 11 million immigrants already living here illegally. And it allocates billions of dollars – including \$3 billion for increased surveillance – to tighten border security.

Under the bill, more foreigners with in-demand job skills will be able to get visas; currently those with family members already here are heavily favored.

Part of the bill would create new guest worker programs for farmhands and low-wage workers. Another section raises the cap on temporary high-skilled visas and creates a “start-up” visa for entrepreneurs who want to found companies in the U.S.

“It will be a tremendous boost to California’s economy,” said Sung Won Sohn, an economics professor at Cal State Channel Islands. “We will be able to get the right people from overseas and utilize them for the benefit of the economy.”

But the bill still faces many hurdles, even after months of negotiations among the eight senators. Opponents of any reform that offers a road to citizenship for undocumented workers in the U.S. can kill the bill. An immigration overhaul attempt under President George W. Bush in 2007, the last time a serious effort was made to retool the system, died on the Senate floor.

But this time around, public opinion may be on the bill's side. Nearly two-thirds of Americans support giving undocumented workers a way to attain citizenship, according to a recent survey by the Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute. Sixty-eight percent polled say that a combination of enforcement and a path to citizenship was the best cure for the country's illegal immigration problems.

Many California businesses welcomed the outline of the bill released Tuesday.

Farmers already struggling with a slowdown in workers from Mexico – brought on by a border crackdown, faltering economic recovery and drug violence – were hopeful the bill could widen the pool of laborers.

"The ones from Mexico are here to work," said Ken Shinkawa, a raisin grower in Caruthers. "They don't fool around. They just want to make their money and go home."

In the past, Shinkawa said, he was forced to hire mostly undocumented workers. He has tried hiring U.S. employees, but that has never worked out. One year, he said, the Fresno residents he brought on couldn't pick and stole his air conditioner.

And lately, he's had trouble finding anyone to work his fields.

High-tech firms, which have lobbied hard for immigration reform, say the bill would bring much-needed highly skilled workers and entice international students who attend U.S. colleges to stay after graduation. Mark Zuckerberg, chief executive of Facebook Inc., even joined forces with executives from Google, Yahoo and other tech giants to form a new initiative called Fwd.us to push for reform.

"Immigration is innovation," said Dean Garfield, chief

executive of the Information Technology Industry Council, an advocacy group for tech firms. "Every day that goes by without immigration reform is another day when new jobs and new industries start in a foreign country."

Already, about 35 percent to 40 percent of Silicon Valley's workers are foreign, said Stephen Levy, director of the Center for Continuing Study of the California Economy. He said guest workers can help plug a gap in California as highly skilled baby boomers retire.

The finance and banking industry is also eager to hire workers such as mathematicians and computer experts to create programs to maximize trading and fight cyber attacks, said Scott Talbott, senior lobbyist for the Financial Services Roundtable, which represents banks, insurers and investment firms.

Los Angeles-based City National Bank already employs immigrants from Russia, Mexico, India and elsewhere, said Chief Executive Russell Goldsmith. He said one of the bank's biggest strengths is being able to attract "some of the best and brightest individuals from all over the world."

"We need and do hire people born elsewhere in information services and technology," he said. "But you'll find people born elsewhere throughout the bank."