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## IMMIGRATION

# Congress may favor guest-worker plan this year

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**WASHINGTON** - The introduction Wednesday of an ambitious agricultural guest-worker plan showcases the changed Capitol Hill circumstances that may make 2007 the year for an immigration overhaul.

Some congressional roadblocks are gone. Sympathetic new leaders are in charge. A restored Democratic majority claims new priorities.

"A year does make a difference," insisted Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho.

Or so he hopes.

Joined by lawmakers from California and Florida, including Sen. Mel Martinez, and backed by hundreds of farm, labor and church groups, Craig is reintroducing a guest-worker plan that's been debated for years. As many as 1.5 million farmworkers and their relatives now in this country illegally could gain legal status under the bill.

The legislation, dubbed AgJobs, would also revise an existing guest-worker program that farmers consider inefficient. It's the first big immigration overhaul bill introduced this year, mirroring legislation passed last year by the Senate but not the House of Representatives.

"I happen to believe we have the votes," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif. "I believe the bill can move quickly."

The legislation would grant "blue cards" to illegal immigrants who could prove they had worked in agriculture for at least 150 days in the past two years. They must continue working in agriculture for several years before attaining permanent legal status.

The Republicans who controlled the House last year refused to bring the guest-worker legislation up for a vote. This year, Democrats control the House, 233-202.

Last year's chairman of the House immigration subcommittee, Indiana Republican John Hostettler, staunchly opposed guest-worker bills. Voters ejected him in November. This

year's immigration panel chair, California Democrat Zoe Lofgren, supports the guest-worker legislation.

Likewise, the skeptical GOP chairman of the House Judiciary Committee -- Wisconsin's James Sensenbrenner -- has been replaced by a sympathetic Democrat, Rep. John Conyers of Michigan.