

Georgia governor signs sweeping immigration bill

By SHANNON McCaffrey

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

April 17, 2006

ATLANTA -- Gov. Sonny Perdue on Monday signed a sweeping immigration bill that supporters and critics say will make Georgia's laws among the toughest in the nation.

"I want to make this clear: we are not, Georgia's government is not, and this bill is not anti-immigrant," Perdue said Monday at a signing ceremony.

"We simply believe that everyone who lives in our state needs to abide by our laws."

The Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act will verify that adults seeking many state-administered benefits are in the country legally. It sanctions employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants and mandates that companies with state contracts check the immigration status of their employees.

The law will also require police to check the immigration status of people they arrest to see if they face deportation orders.

The measure is believed to be the first comprehensive immigration package to make it through a statehouse this session, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Many of the new law's provisions will not take effect until July 1, 2007.

Tisha Tallman, Southeast regional counsel for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, said she was studying potential legal challenges to the bill. Tallman said she was "incredibly disappointed" that Perdue signed the bill, rather than waiting for the federal government to act.

The bill drew protests at Georgia's state Capitol and prompted a daylong work stoppage by thousands of immigrants.

The new law will not affect emergency medical care and education for children in kindergarten through 12th grade, which federal courts have said must be provided regardless of immigration status. Exemptions were also added for some other services like prenatal care and the treatment of communicable diseases.

The move to tighten up rules in Georgia comes as lawmakers in Washington wrestle with competing proposals to shore up controls at the border, create a guest worker program and create a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants already in the United States.

Outside the Capitol on Monday, a few hundred supporters of the legislation roared their applause when word came that Perdue was planning to sign the proposal.

The crowd waved American flags and cheered as state Rep. Melvin Everson, one of the Georgia House's two black Republicans, denounced illegal immigration as a cancer and proclaimed: "The last time I checked, America was the land of English _ not Spanish."

And they hollered as Republican state Sen. Chip Rogers, the bill's author, called it "the strongest single bill in America dealing with illegal immigration _ bar none."

But perhaps the greatest applause came when Catherine Davis, a black Republican running for Congress against U.S. Rep. Cynthia McKinney, was introduced.

If Davis is elected, she vowed, "I'd tell all the illegal aliens to go home."

At the bill signing on Monday, Rogers said he has been approached by state lawmakers from South Carolina and Colorado who were interested in crafting similar proposals for their states. And Rogers said he hoped to introduce legislation next year tackling document fraud, which he said undermines efforts to enforce immigration law.

Rogers acknowledged the bill Perdue signed on Monday is not a cure all, but said the state was acting where the federal government refused to.