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Bush hit over jobs for illegal workers

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By Stephen Dinan - If President Bush is serious about getting tough on U.S. employers who hire illegal aliens, he can start with his own administration, which employs thousands of unauthorized workers, says the top Republican on the House immigration subcommittee.

A 2006 audit showed federal, state and local governments are among the biggest employers of the half-million persons in the U.S. illegally using "non-work" Social Security numbers — numbers issued legally, but with specific instructions that the holders are not authorized to work in the U.S.

"Let's clean up our own house, let's especially clean up the federal employment of all those working for the federal government," said Rep. Steve King, Iowa Republican and ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee's immigration subcommittee.

The Social Security Administration used to, but no longer does, issue non-work numbers to legal aliens who were not authorized to work but needed a number to obtain a federal or state benefit or service. Still, hundreds of thousands of those immigrants used the numbers to get a job.

According to the 2006 audit by the Social Security inspector general, 17 of the 100 worst employers using employees with non-work numbers were government agencies: seven federal agencies, seven state agencies and three local governments. That means the government knows who those employees are, but usually does not go after them.

Earlier this month, Homeland Security and Commerce departments announced a new crackdown on illegal entry that includes stricter enforcement against employers. The departments said they will encourage businesses to use E-Verify to check employees' Social Security numbers, and said the federal government will write new rules requiring all private contractors and vendors that do business with it to use E-Verify.

Under current law, neither business nor federal agencies are required to use E-Verify, formerly known as the Basic Pilot Program.

Mr. King said the administration shouldn't wait for new rules to begin checking federal employees against the non-work list.

"There's a lot more they can do, but the federal government's at least got to run their non-work Social Security numbers against their own employee database, and then they've got to require states to do that, and local governments to do that," he said.

The problem is broader than just federal hiring. The latest figures from the Social Security Administration, reported in March, found 521,426 non-work Social Security numbers had earnings credited to them for work done in 2005 and credited during calendar year 2006.

Social Security provides a list of those numbers to Homeland Security every year, but the department has been reluctant to use them for enforcement, arguing to Congress in testimony last year it would take a significant amount of resources and could distract from national security priorities. Homeland Security

also says a high percentage of the non-work numbers turn out to be clerical errors or workers who later obtained authorization.

The inspector general says those cases do occur, but more often than not — about 60 percent of the time — the employees are in fact not authorized to work in the U.S. The audit said for government agencies, the percentage is slightly lower: 44 percent of the government workers identified in their sample were unauthorized for employment in the U.S. The inspector general did not name the 100 worst employers on its list.

The inspector general said as long as workers are using invalid numbers, homeland security is threatened, and said telling employers directly about employees using invalid numbers could help stem the flow of illegal workers.

In a sample of 275 individuals using non-work numbers, the inspector general found two were found to have warrants for deportation already lodged against them. The inspector general said it forwarded that information to Homeland Security for action.

Meanwhile, Rep. Duncan Hunter, California Republican and presidential hopeful, says Mr. Bush is falling behind on construction of the U.S.-Mexico border fence that he signed into law last year.

In a letter to the president, Mr. Hunter said just 17.9 miles of the new double-tier fencing has been constructed as of Aug. 10 — putting the administration off the pace he said it needs to build 392 miles by May 30. All told, he said the fence is supposed to reach 854 miles which, because of the region's geography, will seal off about 700 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Washington Times reported earlier this month the U.S. Border Patrol sent out a memo calling for agents to volunteer to help build fencing because they are going to fall short of their goal.

Scott Stanzel, a spokesman for the White House, said they are trying to secure the border by adding Border Patrol agents and vehicle barriers. He said there are 100 miles of fencing on the border, and they want a total of 145 miles by September, though those figures include single-tier fencing and fencing that was built in prior years.
